May
Weird Tales
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35¢
SONG IN THE THICKET
Manly Banister
Silvey

The Editor, WEIRD TALES
9 Rockefeller Plaza
New York 20, N. Y.

I shall open this letter with a sidelight which may prove interesting to some of your readers. I have formed a group of children who like to listen to ghost stories and weird fiction of every description. We call it the Ghost Story Club, and we meet once a week, always after dark, of course. I always have at least one planned story for the group, and if we have extra time available I allow the youngsters to try their hand at story-telling. Several times I have used stories from WEIRD TALES, and these have always been enthusiastically received. Such stories as MR. GEORGE, MAYAYA'S LITTLE GREEN MEN, SWEETS TO THE SWEET, POOR LITTLE TAMPICO, and ONCE THERE WAS A LITTLE GIRL were especially favorites. I fear though that G. G. Pendarves' THING OF DARKNESS was just a bit too vivid for them. That last session broke up in a discussion of who was going to walk home with whom!

As a concluding paragraph, I should like to discuss further my suggestion for a companion magazine titled WEIRD NOVELS. You have published many excellent serials in the past which would never fit into your present policy and makeup. You could print some of these complete in such a companion magazine. But the publication should not use reprint novels exclusively. At least every other should contain a new book-length by your best current writers. How about a Derleth-Bloch collaboration or a new, original Cthulhu novel? Or a book-length DeGrandin werewolf-vampire mystery by Seabury Quinn? Let's hear from the other fans on this idea.

Also, let's have other opinions on the following suggestions: Increase the size of WEIRD TALES bi-monthly to 170 pages to sell at 50¢ a copy. Inaugurate WEIRD NOVELS bi-monthly, approximately 170 pages, to sell at 50¢ a copy. Inaugurate WEIRD TALES CLASSICS, 170 pages, to include the great tales from your ancient files as requested by the readers, to sell at $1.00 a copy. All of the magazines to be illustrated.

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Weird Tales

May 1954

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SONG IN THE THICKET (A novelette) . . . Manly Banister 2
Neither closer nor farther, the voices urged him onward—calling, luring, promising, lulling.

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Cover by W. H. SILVEY

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D. McILWRAITH, *Editor*

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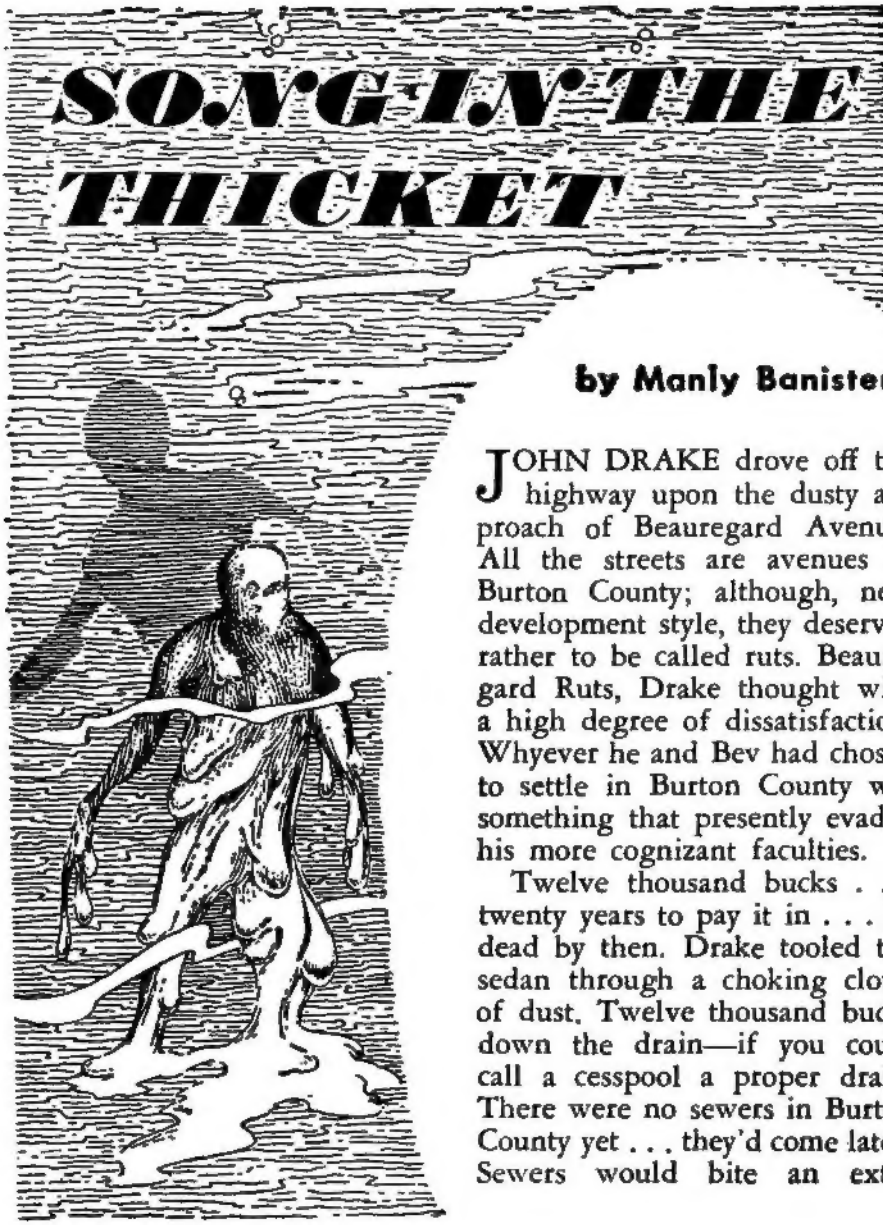
Heading by W. H. Silvey

SONG IN THE THICKET

by Manly Banister



JOHN DRAKE drove off the highway upon the dusty approach of Beauregard Avenue. All the streets are avenues in Burton County; although, new development style, they deserved rather to be called ruts. Beauregard Ruts, Drake thought with a high degree of dissatisfaction. Whyever he and Bev had chosen to settle in Burton County was something that presently evaded his more cognizant faculties.

Twelve thousand bucks . . . twenty years to pay it in . . . be dead by then. Drake tooled the sedan through a choking cloud of dust. Twelve thousand bucks down the drain—if you could call a cesspool a proper drain. There were no sewers in Burton County yet . . . they'd come later. Sewers would bite an extra

Is it true that an Undine can obtain a soul by marrying a human being?

twenty-five dollars a month out of his already inadequate income. He kicked himself for not having foreseen the sewer problem. Add that expense to house payments, car payments, insurance, lights, water, gas, food, clothing, and the sizable sum he had invested in a perverted lawn that refused to become grass. . . .

He braked to a crawl and steered carefully around a big mud puddle in the middle of the road. A dollar and a quarter he'd spent this very day for a wash job, and damned if he was going to throw *that* away with a wild dive through that obscene patch of liquidity.

No wonder there was a puddle in the road, Drake mused viciously. The whole benighted country was clay from the surface to the center of the earth . . . and probably a few thousand miles beyond. No drainage through clay . . . clay! No wonder his lawn wouldn't grow! Gezwich told him that yesterday . . . no, it was this morning. You got to haul in topsoil, Gezwich had said, or put in sod. Need topsoil in any case . . . the builders buried the original topsoil under the junk they dug out to make the basement.

Drake had always thought dirt was dirt, and dirt was what grass grew in. Thirty bucks worth of seed and fertilizer—hours of back-breaking effort—and the yard was still a semi-sea of yellowish mud whenever it rained. When it didn't rain, the soil baked so hard you couldn't sink a pick in it. Oh, of course, he had a *few* sprigs of grass here and there . . . crabgrass grows anywhere.

Drake steered carefully around another puddle. There were not many finished houses on Beauregard Avenue. Drake had the last one, at the end of the street. There were several more about midway down, but all the other lots were still a-building. Lean skeleton houses lined the dusty road.

ANOTHER puddle. Drake peered at it with a frown of disfavor. Something about those puddles had set his subconscious mind to working. He could almost hear the whirring and clicking of mental cogs. The puddle was as ordinary as any, damp around the edges and wet in the middle. Otherwise, the roadway was covered with a thick, soft layer of dust. There wasn't much traffic on the back streets of Burton County, and Drake was sure those puddles had not been there when he left for work this morning. If it had rained in Burton County today, the roadway would at least be damp, wouldn't it . . .?

Drake coped no further with the problem of the puddles. He

carefully negotiated the perimeters of several more and drove onto his own drive.

A flurry of pink and white in a yellow starched housedress of economical cotton fluttered at the kitchen door, hurtled out to the car. Drake opened the door.

"H'lo, hon. How's m'baby?"

Beverly Drake planted a luscious, soul-satisfying kiss on her homecoming husband's lean chops. They still had a couple of million kisses to go—and a couple of babies, too—before Bev would content herself with a mere look out the window as John came driving in. For the present, they were very much married, and very much in love.

"I'm *so* glad you're home, lover boy!"

Beverly was blonde, sparkling blue-eyed, warm and cuddlesome. Drake grabbed her to him and returned the luscious, soul-satisfying kiss she had so generously given him.

" 'Smatter? Trouble?"

He knew there was no trouble. Bev said it every night. She was just glad he was home and wanted him to know it. He knew it and was glad of it, too. Bev was all he wanted out of life—the rest of it could go hang.

He expressed the depth of his feelings with, "What's for supper, baby?"

She ignored his outburst of connubial passion.

"John there's something I want you to do for me before it gets dark . . ."

"Eh? Sure . . . anything at all, baby!"

He kissed her again, even more satisfying than before.

"Well!" she balked, pulling free. "Nothing like killing a dragon or anything! I just want you to drain a puddle out of the front yard."

He went up the kitchen steps into the house.

"Let it dry up, baby."

"But John . . .!"

He turned, chucked her under the chin, grinning.

"Anything for you, baby . . . after supper!"

He progressed into the living room, dumped his hat on a chair. He sprawled on the davenport. "Where's m'paper?"

"Pork chops for supper . . . to answer your questions in the order of their appearance," Beverly said, running one hand through his hair. She balanced herself delicately on the arm of the davenport.

"As for your paper—it's out in the middle of that nasty puddle I was telling you about!"

"The hell it is!" Drake swung himself to a sitting posture. "What kind of an idiot have we got for a paper boy? Get on the phone and have another sent over."

Beverly went dutifully to the

phone, called the local distributor.

"He'll be by with it in about a half hour," she said, hanging up. "John, I want to discuss that puddle with you . . ."

Drake lay back on the davenport and reached for a magazine.

"Hmmmm. Hope you told that guy what I think of his delivery . . ."

"John, the puddle . . ."

"Lots of puddles," John observed, whetting his glance on a four-color representation of pulchritude in the magazine ad. "There are puddles all over the road," he said. "What do you expect when it rains?"

"Did it rain downtown today?"

"Don't think it did . . . just out here."

"Not out here, it didn't. I've been home all day, so I know."

"Maybe a street cleaning wagon went by."

"Be sensible!"

"Okay. Maybe there's a water main bust."

"John—this puddle in front of our door. . . ."

Drake's face went a trifle gray.

"Good God! Do you suppose *our* water main could be broken? And on *our* side of the meter? . . . Oy! At the rate we're paying for water!"

He got up quickly and opened the front door.

"It isn't a broken water main," Beverely said matter-of-factly, "because the water doesn't flow. It just puddles. There seems to be a sag in the walk there, right at the foot of the steps."

Indeed, it did appear that the water filled a sag in the concrete walkway. It lapped out several feet on either side into the gruesome mockery of a lawn. John knew there couldn't be a sag there. The grade sloped from the house to the street . . . the walk itself was slightly crowned.

The evening paper lay, as Beverly had said, in the middle of the puddle, just beyond reach of a questing broom handle.

"Could you drain it?" Beverly suggested, referring to the puddle. "Dig a little ditch or something?"

"It'll dry up by morning," Drake protested dubiously.

"Are we to ask the Harrians to wade through it tonight? Remember . . . we're having them over for canasta. Or do you?"

Drake hadn't remembered, but he did now.

"Get me a broom," he said tersely, "and go on with supper. I'll sweep it away."

"Huh-uh."

"Huh-uh what? Must I get my own broom?"

"Nuh. No sweep."

"Nonsense. Get me a broom."

"It won't work, I say."

"Why won't it work? Get me that broom!"

"Okay, Canute. Have it your way."

She flounced into the house and a moment later the broom came bouncing out. Drake caught it and began to sweep industriously, sending the offensive puddle in foaming waves down the walk. Observing the damp spot that remained, he shook the moisture from the broom with complete satisfaction and went into the house.

Drake was in process of mangling his third pork chop when Mr. Barnes, the neighborhood newspaper distributor, knocked on the door. He passed the paper and a mumbled apology through the door to John.

"That's certainly a man-size puddle you've got there," he allowed. "You got a bad sag in your walk. What I always say about these houses they build nowadays, scamp the work, that's what they do! Never try to see a thing is done right. If you was me, I'd get hot after the contractor that left that sag in the walk. You get a puddle like that from watering your yard, you'll see it's a fright when it rains!"

With that, he politely touched the brim of his fedora, stepped off the porch and sloshed off through the puddle. Drake stared after him, nonplussed. It was almost dark, and the puddle gleamed silvery with sky light.

Beverly said over his shoulder, "I see it's back."

There was a tone of smug satisfaction in her words that stung Drake.

"I suppose you knew it would be?" he hurled at her.

"Yup. I swept it away three times myself today!"

"Get me that broom again!" Drake snapped. "I'll do some more sweeping—see if it's a water line bust, or a spring in our front yard!"

"John, dear . . . your supper . . ."

"Hang supper! I've finished anyway."

He swept the water away again. During the last half of the operation, he had to have the porch light on to see by. Finally, there was only a damply gleaming streak reflecting the shine of the early evening stars.

Drake examined the ground on both sides of the walk and along the foundation, but there were no tell-tale streams of moisture bubbling from the earth or anywhere else. For the last time, Drake shook out the broom, stamped moisture from his soggy footgear, and went grumpily back into the house. He left the porch light on for the expected arrival of the Harrians.

Neither John nor Bev heard Ben and Zuelda Harrian drive

up. A bedroom intervened between the living room and the driveway, and the TV set was making an exorbitant amount of noise. A loud hallooing and banging at the back door announced the arrival of the expected couple.

"The front door's for coming in," Drake greeted them pleasantly, switching on the drive light.

Zuelda, tiny, buoyant, vivacious and brunette, assumed a mien of mock indignation.

"Wade through that puddle? Or do you furnish a boat?"

Tall, handsome Ben Harrian, as dark and sombre as his wife was dark and sparkling, nudged her through the door.

"Go in, Zuelda!"

The expression was just like him, Drake thought . . . so grammatically proper. He could not imagine Ben saying "go on in" like a native would have said it.

"Don't keep the man waiting with the door open," Ben concluded, and grinned at Drake as they passed through the kitchen. "That *is* a big sink you have in your front yard, Jack. Been watering the lawn?"

"That's the second time tonight somebody has blamed lawn watering for that puddle," Drake retorted. "I haven't got enough of a lawn to waste our high-priced water on. If there's a puddle there now, it's grown in the last hour. I've swept it away twice this evening. I don't know where it comes from . . . nor where it goes to!"

Ben lifted heavy, perfectly arched brows.

"Tut, tut . . . not so touchy, Jack! Sorry to tramp on your feelings, but it *is* a big puddle . . ."

"All right," Drake said. "All right! Let's go into the living room."

The living room emitted a blast of variegated squeals and giggles as Bev and Zuelda came face to face. The Harrians were really Beverly's friends, Drake thought, as he put their things away in the bedroom while Bev and Zuelda hugged each other.

The Harrians had arrived in the city, friendless, a few months ago, and Ben had landed a job in the shipping department of Drake's company. A background of extensive Old World travel and an uncanny familiarity with every backwoods hamlet in America made Ben a natural for the shipping department post.

Drake, of course, had been responsible for Beverly's meeting Zuelda. He'd invited the couple the first time, out of a desire to be friendly to the new man. Ben had accepted the invitation with a surprising warmth, and from then on . . . well, it had been like a rolling stone picking up momentum.

Not that he disliked Ben Harrian. Drake just was not a gregarious type, and the thoughtless remarks of others frequently irritated him. Ben was quite good at being irritating, and apparently without meaning to be.

Zuelda, now . . . she was cute and convivial and . . . well, hell! . . . it's natural for a man to take less umbrage with a good-looking woman than with another fellow, isn't it? Zuelda had a mouth like a fresh, red rosebud, deep, dark eyes that swam in a sea of gaiety, and a figure . . . Drake's neighbors *never* irritated him with things like that!

The group settled down to a comfortable game of canasta. The conversation was bright and sparkling. Ben was witty, Drake had to say that for him. He was extremely cultured, betraying in speech and manners an unusual education coupled with a wide knowledge of little known subjects.

Ordinarily, Drake enjoyed the Harrian's company well enough, but tonight a worry oppressed him. He didn't like things that went unexplained. Finally, he put words to his aggravation.

"The thought of that puddle is getting me down!"

"Tell your contractor about it," Ben observed judiciously, quietly studying his cards and playing with great care.

"You mean I should make him replace the walk. The walk doesn't need replacing. There's no sink in it. But where is that water coming from?"

"I wouldn't worry about it," Ben observed lazily.

"I *should* worry," Drake said stiffly. "It's *my* walk."

The game continued with something less of its former sparkle. Bev mixed and served cocktails, and spirits picked up again.

"It's either a busted water main or a spring in the front yard," Drake gloomed.

"How terrible!" Zuelda put in. "Your nice new house!"

Drake looked at her gratefully. Ben tapped his cards against a gleaming thumbnail.

"A spring? That's a possibility, Jack."

Drake tossed his hand on the table.

"Come on, Ben. Let's look it over. Maybe you can see something I couldn't the last time I looked."

ARMED with a flashlight, Drake flipped on the porch light and went out. The puddle was a black and shining smear at the foot of the steps, extending out a considerable distance along the walk and into the yard on either side. Drake flashed the torch over the far perimeter of the glistening slick.

"It's bigger than it was last time, and for the life of me, I

can't figure what keeps it from flowing down the walk. Might as well be tar." He dipped the toe of his shoe into the pool. "But it isn't. It's water, all right."

Ben made a humming noise in his throat but offered no other comment. Suddenly he snapped his fingers.

"Might be a spring at that, Jack! I know a fellow who might be able to tell you something. Old Tom Ellers . . . he lives over near us, on a back street. Sort of a neighborhood handyman. He . . ." Ben stopped, at a loss for words.

"Go on," Drake prompted. "He, what?"

"He . . . he's what they call a water witch. . . ."

"One of those guys who twiddles a stick and finds water?"

"You might put it that way . . ."

"Ha!" Drake glared gloomily at the puddle. "I can find water without a stick. Here it is . . . see?"

"I mean," Ben put in, "that Tom could find out where it is coming from . . . if it is a spring."

Drake glanced sourly up at the taller man.

"You don't . . . *believe* that rot, do you?"

"Well . . ." Ben temporized. "I can't do it myself, but Tom . . ."

"Let's go in the house," Drake grumped. Ben's talk of the water witch irritated him more completely than anything else that had passed between them this night. "If I got a spring pouring up there, I can find it myself tomorrow!"

DRAKE could not find the spring the following morning, though he swept the puddle away once more before going to work. Far from being happy at not finding the evidence he sought, Drake was so put out he failed to notice that yesterday's puddles were gone from the road, though new pools of water gleamed among the row of houses under construction.

Having had the day in which to think over his predicament, he dropped into Ben's office shortly before quitting time.

"What'd you call that fellow, Ben?"

Ben looked up from a desk full of papers. "What fellow?"

"You know . . . last night . . . was it . . . water witch?"

"Oh . . . you mean Tom Ellers. Sure. Decided to have a try at it? Now, I don't guarantee Tom can actually tell you where that water is coming from, Jack . . ."

Drake waved a hand.

"I looked all over hell for a spring this morning. Didn't find any."

"Was the water still there?"

"I swept it away."

"It's gone now?"

"I . . . well . . . it's always come back before. Let me call Bev."

He scooped up Ben's phone, dialed outside, then rapidly dialed his home phone number. Beverly answered promptly.

"How's that puddle, hon? The one in front, I mean."

There was a brief pause. "It's back again, John."

Drake swore. "Sorry, honey," he apologized.

"That isn't all."

"Isn't all?"

"No. There's another one across the drive from the kitchen door, and a third one in the back yard!"

"Have you been . . ." Drake began suspiciously.

"Whatever it is you're thinking, I haven't. And it hasn't rained today, either."

"Uh . . . thanks. See you." Drake hung up, looked gloomily at Ben.

"Bev says it's back . . . and there's another in the side yard and one in back."

Ben whistled softly.

"You just *could* have a spring breaking out in several places. You'd better let me bring Tom Ellers over this evening."

"Sure, but . . . what could he do?"

Ben shrugged. "He might be able to give you a hint whether it's permanent or not . . . or show you some way to divert it."

Drake shook his head. "I can't believe in that kind of stuff."

Ben hoisted his shoulders again.

"Nobody does, really . . . except the water witches. Nobody believes in their ability . . . but they hire them every day to find water."

"Is that true? I thought water witching was some kind of fable . . ."

"Many water sources have been discovered by the so-called water witches. Fable or not, they frequently do locate water under ground with nothing but a stick."

Drake gave in with a sigh.

"Okay. How about bringing this . . . Ellers around, hey? I don't know what good he can do, but maybe . . . just maybe . . . he can tell me for sure if I've got a damned spring running loose or not!"

ELLERS turned out to be a wizened little man of about sixty, gaunt as a pitchfork, sparsely topped with gray. His cheeks like old bacon rind were covered with a gray stubble. He was dressed in sordid blue overalls, and his wretched once-white shirt bore witness to at least a score of bachelor meals. He grinned all over, shaking hands with Drake.

"Pleased t'meet yew, Mist' Drake!"

Drake smiled affably as the little dowser ambled out of Ben's coupe.

"Ben . . . uh . . . tells me you're a . . . water witch, Mr. Ellers."

Tom Ellers' blue eyes turned frosty. He frowned.

"They ain't no sech thing as a witch, Mist' Drake. I'm a plain, natural dowser, that's all. I dowses for water . . . ain't no witchin' to it!"

Drake acknowledged his error with a look of pained embarrassment, hiding an inward smile.

"Do you think I've got a spring on the property, Mr. Ellers?"

The oldster stamped on the concrete drive, surveyed the lay of the land with a critical eye.

"T'tell 'e truth, Mist' Drake, if I was one of these geology fellers, I'd say there wasn't a chance in the world. This county is solid clay more than two hundred foot down, to bedrock. But that ain't the case." He fell musingly silent, scanning the slope behind the house and its thickets of scrub elm and willow. "No, sir, it ain't the case. There's lots of water here—I can feel it. I am one of them as can," he observed with a proud grin, "though I like the feel o' the stick for pinning it down. Let me cut a stick, now, and I'll be right with you."

Ellers stamped off briskly in the direction of the thicket behind the garage. Drake glanced inquiringly at Ben. The tall, dark man smiled easily.

"He's gone to cut a divining rod—the forked stick he uses."

Ellers returned in an instant, paring leaves and stems from a forked branch of elm.

"We c'n start aroun' in front," he hailed cheerfully, "by that big puddle, and come on aroun' this-away . . ."

He led off quickly, with a spryness that belied his years, shucking the last of the leaves in the drive. He skirted the edge of the puddle on the sad description of lawn, raising the "rod" until it pointed upward like a V, in a peculiar, back-handed kind of grip.

Drake was not prepared for what happened next. He jumped as the rod whipped violently downward, swung back up another half arc between Ellers' arms and beat the air in front of his chin. The dowser's brown face mirrored his physical strain. His arms twisted, seeming to fight the vicious pull of the rod, and he found it difficult to keep his footing. Suddenly the old man stumbled and fell, losing his grip on the writhing rod.

Ellers got up with a shamefaced grin.

"You've sure got a lot of water under there, Mist' Drake. See how that blamed rod th'owed me? One nev' th'ow me befo',

though I did hear tell of it happenin'."

He grinned, braced himself, and swung the rod upward. It flapped violently again, seeming to twist itself from the old man's grip.

"Plenty there, all right," Ellers grunted. "Naow, le's aroun' to side."

He led off again, and Drake hurled an accusing glance at Ben.

"Is that guy nuts or something?"

The half-grin of understanding he had expected from Ben did not materialize. The tall man's lean face suffused with a saturnine frown.

"You modern Americans don't believe in anything; that's your trouble!" he spoke harshly.

Drake shrugged, privately thinking that Ben Harrian must be nuts, too, if he took any stock in this sort of thing.

Ellers was in the side yard, his rod doing a witch's dance over the second puddle. "I'd say, Mist' Drake, they's a great big spring feedin' that pool, but you doan' see it runnin' out anywheh!"

Drake regarded the pool. The sun was below the horizon by now. It had been sunset when Ben drove in with the old fellow. Lingering twilight reflected from the surface of the pool, which seemed to ruffle, swirling, as if caressed by a brisk wind.

But there was no wind . . . not a breath. Drake peered more closely at the puddle. The surface was definitely agitated in brisk motion.

Ellers cupped the rod in his armpit and moved into the back yard where the performance was repeated. He held his rod up again, turning this way and that, seeming to read significance into the waving and waggling of the forked stick.

"I think, Mist' Drake, I can find fo' you where that stream is comin' from . . ."

The oldster took off at a high lope toward the thicketed slope. Drake took a step to follow, heard Ben call out to Ellers, then Ben's hand on his arm arrested him.

"He'll be back in a minute. The big spring, or source, is probably up there on the slope some place. No use our crashing around the brush after him . . . he'll go in a straight line through anything in the way!"

It was, Drake saw, almost dark. The sky still glared against the horizon, silhouetting the thickety ridge, which was now like a pool of ink.

DRAKE didn't know how long they waited. Ben passed the time with a few comments on dowsing which he seemed to have gleaned from some place. It may have been ten minutes, or fifteen. Shadows gathered thickly on the

drive until Drake could scarcely see the tall man's face. Before they knew it, darkness closed in. Stars sprang into being in the velvety overhead. Drake fumbled his way to the kitchen door, found the light switch just inside, and turned on the drive light.

"Your friend ought to be coming back pretty soon, hadn't he, Ben?"

Ben shrugged. "He may have gone farther than we think. No use shouting. If he's still dowsing, he wouldn't hear us."

Drake peered across the drive toward the puddle that had puzzled him wtih its seeming agitation. He clutched Ben's arm.

"Ben! The puddle . . . !"

The tall man swung around.

"What . . . ?"

"It isn't there!"

"Sure enough!" Ben bit his lip. He looked sidelong at Drake. "How about . . . ?"

Drake bounded through the house, nearly scaring Beverly out of her wits. A long minute later, he returned slowly.

"It's gone."

"I checked the one in the back yard," Ben said.

Drake looked at him. Ben nodded.

"What the hell . . . !" Drake exploded.

"What can it be?" murmured Ben Harrian. "Jack, you don't believe in superstition, of course, but I've made a study of such things. Frankly, this business worries me."

"Your friend Ellers is what's worrying me!" Drake barked at him. "We'd better look for him."

Drake went inside for a flashlight. It took an hour, casting about in widening circles, to find the little dowser on the thickety slope. A three-quarter moon rising in the east cast oblique light into a small clearing about two hundred yards from the house. They found Tom Ellers there . . . quite dead.

"Poor little devil!" Drake mourned as they picked their way back to the house. "I feel guilty as hell, having you bring him over here . . ."

Ben's voice was a mumble in the darkness. "Forget it, Jack."

"We couldn't know he had a bad heart, could we, Ben?"

"Forget it, Jack!"

Drake nearly wept with remorse. "Ben, I . . ."

Ben's firm, slim hand came out of the darkness, shook Drake forcibly.

"Forget it!"

Drake's teeth rattled. Momentary rage swarmed through him. But the shaking cleared his head. He felt his guts settle slowly back into place.

"Sorry, Ben . . . here, take it easy . . . here's the yard . . ."

They rounded the garage and went into the house. Drake did not see the shadow lurking there,

out of the moonglow. As the kitchen door closed, the shadow detached itself from the garage, drifted down the drive and into the night.

"Guess we better call the sheriff, Ben?"

"That is the usual procedure," Ben said gruffly.

Drake moved toward the phone. Ben put a hand on his arm. He made a motion signifying a drink in Beverly's direction. Beverly understood, sped worriedly into the kitchen where they kept a fifth under the sink.

"Better let me phone," Ben said.

He made the call quickly, curtly, and turned to Drake.

"Bev is bringing you a drink, Jack. Pull yourself together. The sheriff and his men will be here in a few minutes. Don't mention the puddles to them."

"The puddles?" Drake had forgotten the puddles. "Why?"

Ben grinned tightly. He tapped his forehead with a stiffened finger.

"*That's* why. They'll think you're crazy enough, having a dowser over. Let me do the talking. You just answer what questions are asked of you."

"But, Ben, how about those puddles . . . ?"

"Forget the puddles, Jack!"

Drake felt anger flare in him again. Ben Harrian was master of this situation. He, Drake, in his own house, was a nincompoop. He blamed Ben for accentuating his distress. Beverly appeared suddenly and jammed something cold and firm into his grasp. He tilted the glass, drank. His feelings subsided.

It was a long night. They had to go back to the body, of course, with the sheriff and two of his deputies. Flashlights bobbed in the thicket, pale swords of luminance in the stark glare of the moon. When they came upon the body, Sheriff Hamilton sent a deputy back to the house to await the county coroner, who was an unnecessarily long time in coming.

The remaining deputy occupied the interval taking several flash photographs with an enormous camera.

The sheriff questioned both Ben and Drake, listened to the story Ben told of the water hunt, the graphic description of the speed with which the old man had darted into the brush in search of the "big spring."

"Don't take much stock in water witchin', myself," the sheriff grunted, "though I guess there's a lot of it bein' done. It's plain the old fellow had a bad heart. Too much exertion for a man his age."

The coroner finally came, fussed over the corpse. He wasn't a doctor—the coroner's post in Burton County was a political ap-

pointment—but even he could see that Ellers was dead, and he said so, with what seemed to Drake to be a great deal of unnecessary satisfaction.

"Think his heart gave out, Abe?" rumbled the sheriff.

"Ed, you know I'm not a doctor!" protested the coroner. "We'll have to send the body to the city for a post mortem. All I can say for sure is that he's dead."

The group crashed back through the brush. The two deputies carried the body. At the edge of the thicket, a pair of ambulance men with a stretcher met them. The body was put on the stretcher, carried out to the ambulance in the street. Sheriff Hamilton offered a few last words, legged into his car with his deputies, and the cortege ground away.

Drake was surprised to find Zuelda in the house when they re-entered.

"Bev called me," Zuelda explained. "I had neighbors bring me over."

Ben frowned. "You should not have come, Zuelda . . ."

Zuelda sparkled dangerously. "Leave Bev all alone, with you men out there crashing around in the brush?" She softened suddenly. "Poor old Tom . . . !"

Ben shrugged, turned to Drake.

"I guess we better be going, Jack. It's late." A cloud settled on his thin, handsome face. "There's . . . something frightening going on around here, Jack." He appealed to Beverly. "Aren't you afraid to stay here?"

Beverly shook her head, wondering.

Drake said, "If you're referring to those puddles, Ben, it's your turn to forget it. There's a natural explanation for everything, if you look far enough. As for being afraid of poor old Ellers' ghost . . . I think not!"

Zuelda spoke slowly, looking doubtfully at her husband, as if seeking support from him.

"Ben is . . . is psychic . . . Jack. You can call it that. We wouldn't blame you if you moved out right away after these things have happened."

Drake laughed harshly.

"Too big an investment to leave," he chuckled grimly. "It's over with now, so what is there to worry about? Ben . . . you're too sensitive. I've thought that about you all along. If I told you there were pixies in the thicket, I'm sure you would believe me!"

Ben stared at him oddly while Zuelda anxiously regarded her husband.

"Do you . . . do you know there is something in the thicket . . . ?"

Drake exploded with strained mirth.

"There . . . what did I tell you?

I didn't even say there were pixies, and you . . ." He exploded in another uproar.

"You listen to Ben, Jack!" Zuelda shrilled at him, shocking him out of his semi-hysteria. "Ben knows things you don't know he knows . . . don't dream . . . !"

Ben Harrian's hand came down forcibly on her arm.

"Zuelda! My dear . . ." He turned to Drake, smiling. "Sorry, old man. I take it, then, that you plan to stay right here?"

NOW it was Drake's turn to stare. Could there really be any other thought in the tall man's mind? Move out? Why? Ben seemed satisfied with Drake's reaction. He took his wife solicitously by the shoulder.

"Come, dear. Jack's had a bad evening."

"Sorry I'm not scared out of seven years' growth," Drake put in with a sour grin. "Like some people . . ."

Ben turned, flashing white teeth in a friendly smile.

"Good night, Jack . . . Beverly."

They heard the Harrian's car churning the furlongs to the highway.

Beverly said, "You've insulted them, John, our best friends!" She said it simply, without accusation, as if puzzled, and she awaited an explanation.

Drake passed a hand across his face. His fingers shook.

"I'm sorry, Bev. Shock, I guess. Mostly, I can't stand that guy, anyway. I'll look him up at the office tomorrow and apologize."

He wondered later about Ben's concern over their leaving this place, he and Bev. Drake laughed grimly at the thought. It wasn't in Drake's make-up to scare easily. He wasn't scared at all, he told himself. His reaction was shock . . . sympathy . . . pity for poor old Tom Ellers . . . tough way to end!

The apology he had contemplated making Ben for Beverly's benefit dried up like the puddles in the yard. Drake didn't apologize, and though he saw Ben frequently at the office, there was a strained atmosphere between them. And it didn't matter, Drake told himself, though Bev was worried about losing Zuelda's friendship.

FRIDAY evening, Sheriff Hamilton stopped by. Drake gave Bev that look which both of them tacitly understood to mean vanish. Bev vanished into the kitchen and rattled crockery.

Hamilton opened the skirmish with a few questions about Tom Ellers—pointless questions. Drake shrugged.

"You'd better ask Ben Harrian

about that, Sheriff. I'd never seen the man before in my life."

The sheriff grunted. "I'll get around to Harrian later. Now, about this dowsing. Tell me about that again."

Drake told him. He wanted to mention the puddles, just to spite Ben Harrian, but somehow he could make no mention of them pass his lips.

"Now, tell me again just how you found the body," the sheriff went on.

Drake said, "Aren't you making a lot of unnecessary trouble, Sheriff, over a man's dying of a heart attack?"

Sheriff Hamilton stared levelly into Drake's eyes.

"*I* didn't say Ellers died of a heart attack—leastwise, not tonight."

Drake felt a kind of sick alarm flood him.

"You mean . . . an accident? He could have tripped and fallen . . ."

"He didn't trip."

Drake felt sicker. The thought of an attacker lurking in the thicket . . . probably there while Bev was home alone . . .

"I didn't see any marks to show he might have been clubbed or stabbed, Sheriff. And we didn't hear a shot."

"Ellers wasn't knifed, clubbed or shot."

Drake wondered why the sheriff deliberately prolonged the agony of his disclosure. Did he think he and Ben Harrian had killed Ellers?

"How *did* he die—if it's any of my business?"

"It *might* be your business. It depends on whether Ellers went off into the brush under his own power, as you say, or whether he was carried in there and planted after he was drowned."

"Drowned?"

"The autopsy showed his lungs full of water. Ellers died by strangulation in an aqueous medium . . . if you prefer the language of the autopsy report."

There was a moment of leaden, swimming silence, then the sheriff's rough voice resumed the interrogation.

"Now, you're sure, are you, that Ellers went off alone into the brush . . ."

He does suspect us, Drake thought. A countering thought flashed through his mind. It was Hamilton's job to suspect everybody. He could have no evidence to point suspicion toward Ben or Drake.

Drake said, "I guess I've said enough, Sheriff. If I am under arrest, I'll go peacefully . . ."

The sheriff sighed and got to his feet.

"Sit down. You're not under arrest. I believe your story, and that's the tough part of it. It would be easier if I didn't. If you

find out how a man can drown himself in the middle of a thicket without getting his clothes wet, and without a drop of water anywhere around, let me know huh?"

JOHN DRAKE awoke in the middle of the night with a feeling of palpitant urgency. His ears strained against the unusual quiet of the night, as if seeking again the source of some sound that might have awakened him. Silver moonlight gushed through the bedroom windows from a nearly full moon riding high in the star-powdered sky.

The night was breathlessly still and hot. There was no murmur of insects, no raucous screams of the cicada, a blasting trumpet of sound synonymous with hot weather. He heard only the light breathing of Beverly as she slept quietly beside him, bathed in the light of the moon.

Then, faintly, he heard the sound again, the sound that had brought him awake—a low, throbbing ululation of musical quality that rose and fell on the moon-drenched night, crescendoed to a wail, and fell again to a haunting murmur that was like the whisper of dark waters caressing the smooth stones of an ancient stream bed. With the sound, there came an intensification of the urgent feeling that gripped him. He had to get up and go—someplace, he knew not where. Drake sat up in bed, head cocked for better listening, restraining the mad impulse to jump and run.

It was the sound of a voice—or of many voices, so beautifully blended as to seem one. It was a voice such as Drake had never heard before, its unhuman quality poignant with desire and the promise of sweetness ineffable. As the voice crescendoed, his ear detected the separation of syllables, but the song remained lost to his understanding, the words blurred and indistinct, yet pregnant with a lure that was more than he could resist.

Suddenly the singing was quite loud, as if swelled by an unimaginable chorus, until the room throbbed with its rhythm. Surely, Drake thought, the swelling harmonies must awaken Beverly. But she slept gently on. Drake covered his ears with his hands, but the wild song diminished not a decible in volume.

It came to him then that the voices he heard lifted in song were not in the air at all, but in his own mind, ringing sweet and clear from some mystic, hidden well-spring of his own being. The pathos of it, the lure of it, the liquid, murmuring richness of its rhythmic fabric consumed him, dulled his senses, his power of thought, made of his mind a bright chamber where Nothing-

ness floated in Void and he was robbed of his will.

Like a man in a dream, Drake dressed, stole to the door and out. Moments later, he picked his way through the thicket world of scrubby elms and willows, blundering through an endless, chaotic world of molten-bright moon silver and ebon shadow.

The voices still rang in his mind, neither closer nor farther away, with quickened tempo, with breathless beat, urging him frantically onward, calling, luring, promising, lulling. Drake came out in a clearing in the heart of the thicket. He might have recognized it as the place where they had found Tom Ellers' body, but his external senses were dulled to his surroundings, only the inner ones were afire with the rhythm of that delectable melody.

In the clearing he saw them . . . that angelic chorus . . . that heavenly minstrelsy . . . and the moon bathed with its glare their glowing bodies, effulgent silver against the shadowed backdrop of the thicket. With intricate step and flowing motion they danced . . . naked in the moonlight they danced . . . the grassblades scarcely bending under the flitting lightness of their dainty feet. Scores of female figures dancing, each perfect as cast in the mold of perfection, and from the throat of each seemed to pour that unearthly melody which held him spellbound.

The night became a blur in Drake's mind. By and by, he was vaguely aware that time had passed, that the moon had lowered itself and now poured a colder light athwart the thickety ridge. He stumbled, leaving the thicket behind him to re-cross his own back yard. He did not perceive the shape that huddled in the shadow of the garage and looked after him with complete satisfaction as he groped his way to the kitchen door and into the house. He was not truly conscious of anything until he suddenly awoke to full command of his own senses in his own bed.

Beverly slept quietly yet. She might not have stirred a muscle the whole night through. Drake's mind was a kaleidoscope of moonlight shards and shadows, and twisting, writhing, leaping shapes that glistened silver . . . of soft breasts and yielding torsos, clinging arms and flashing thighs. . . .

The whole vision seemed to contract in his mind, shriveling into a core of hard brilliance, an unremembered spectacle of grandeur and passion. Drake whimpered, his face in his hands, as the last shred of delightful memory drifted beyond his ken, became a throbbing ache that answered nothing of the ques-

tioning pain in his being . . . and demanded much. He slept.

DRAKE could not explain, even to himself, the feeling that gripped him next day. What mystified him was something beyond his unexplainable feeling of physical exhaustion. He spent the morning out of doors, hovering at the fringe of the thicketed slope. Once he cut a forked stick as he had seen Tom Ellers do. He held it in his hands in as nearly the same peculiar manner as he could remember. But it was only a stick—a scrawny, bifurcated wooden thing, dead as a stick of wood in his grasp . . . a stick of wood . . . it was nothing more.

He drove by the Harrian's, but the shades were drawn at all the windows, and nobody answered his knock on the door.

Drake drove into the city, parked by the public library and went in. It was late afternoon when he came out, and he was ravenously hungry. He found a small restaurant, ate, and drove home. It was after sunset when Beverly met him at the door. She looked worried, wifely intuition sensing the disquiet that gnawed at him.

She said, "Your supper is waiting, dear."

Drake roused from his abstraction sufficiently to kiss her lightly.

"Thanks. I ate downtown." At her look of dissappointment, he added quickly, "I'll have a cup of coffee with you while you eat."

The table was set in the kitchen. While Drake gloomed over his coffee, Beverly pecked disinterestedly at her food.

"Have you seen the Harrians today?" he asked.

She raised her brows. "No. Should I have?"

"No. I just thought—" he paused. "I stopped by their place this morning. Nobody was home, and I thought maybe they might have come here. I didn't go directly there . . . I drove around a bit first."

"They weren't here." She paused, wanting to ask the question. She blurted, "Where did you go today, dear?"

"No place." At her continued questioning look, he amplified, "In town to the library."

Beverly seemed suddenly more cheerful. She relexed, smiled.

"Get any good books?"

"Huh? Get any . . .? No . . . I didn't take any out. Just looked through a couple."

"What kind of books?"

He acted as if he didn't want to talk about it, but was impelled to speak.

"Skipped through some books on dowsing . . . you know . . ."

Beverly perked up with a look of interest.

"Are there books about it?"

He chuckled hollowly. "Plenty of books, but none of them say much. There's a history to dowsing, of course, and they all treat that. The authors are either totally for dowsing as a fact, or totally against it. None of the authors, it seems, are dowsers. They're just investigators . . . and writers. It was a foolish notion I had, anyway."

She sensed that the subject oppressed him and wisely refrained from pursuing it further.

"Well, we don't seem to have any more springs in our yard, so I guess it doesn't matter. There's a good play on TV tonight, and I want you just to relax and forget all about . . ."

"Sure. I could stand some rest, hon. Feel beat up." He stood up, yawned, and went into the living room.

The television play was mediocre. Drake yawned all the way through it. At its close, he clumped off to bed and fell instantly into deep, dreamless sleep.

AGAIN the clarion call of the mystic saraband pulled him awake. Drake sat up in bed, panting, his brain astir with vague, delightful memories. Beverly slept peacefully, and the moon painted a broad band of silver across her face and night-clad upper body. The gold of her hair fought against the silver of the moonlight and lost. It looked like a cloud of fine-spun platinum against her pillow.

There was something in the elfin light that flooded the bed which brought out a certain appealing quality no woman save Beverly had ever had for Drake. Briefly he yearned for her, then the throbbing ululation of devilish melody in his mind overcame the impulse and he found himself dressed, crashing through moon-drenched thicket.

The dance slowed its tempo as he approached, and as he stepped through a screen of young elms into the clearing, the swirling of naked figures became a close-knit weaving and swaying, their song a tremulous humming with vocal counterpoint. Suddenly there were words that had meaning for Drake, a contrapuntal repetition, now in low, murmuring melody, liquid as a clear, cold freshet springing down a piney mountainside.

"Hail the Bridegroom! . . . Hail!"

The massed dancers converged upon him. Drake saw the gleam of moonglow on their eyeballs, the flashing refulgence of panting breasts, of sinuous torsos . . . He yielded to an intoxicating influx of passion, a living flame that ripped through his body, then flickered and failed, and nothing of it was left save a frigid ash. The hair prickled at the nape of his neck. The singers

were silent, poised, staring at him, sensing that their hold upon him had somehow snapped.

Drake fell back a step. He yearned to move forward, to be swept up again in a maddening chorus of voices and flowing bodies, in a welter of passion and delight . . . but something deep as the shadow of the elms, as hard and bright as the floating moon, shut like a door between his mind and his feelings . . . and he turned and fled, back to the house, to Beverly, to. . . .

What it was that impelled him so to run, Drake did not know. It was a consuming urgency that brooked no delay, a greater urgency than that imposed upon him by the massed singers in the thicket, and diametrically opposed, accompanied by such a sense of prickling dread that it left him gasping.

He heard the sound of its going as he launched himself against the kitchen door, heard the frantic, watery splashing of it as the door burst open. He flipped the light switch on . . . the floor was a sea of roiling water.

Poised on the threshold, Drake stared at it without comprehension, aware only that it seethed and boiled away from him, smote with a splash against the cellar door. The panel crashed open, and the water poured foaming into the basement.

Almost at once, the automatic sump pump woke to whirring life, began to pump the water into the French drain prepared for its outflow beside the house.

A step grated on the drive and Drake whirled. Ben Harrian stood limned in the light pouring out of the kitchen door. His face drawn and pallid. His mouth was half open, as if he had been about to speak.

"What do you want?" Drake snarled at him.

The sump pump still whirred softly in the basement. Drake knew that Ben heard it too, and he suspected that Ben knew why it was whirring. What was Ben Harrian doing here at this time of night, anyway? Drake got hold of himself.

"Sorry. I didn't see it was you, Ben. What's the trouble?"

Ben smiled slightly, his thin, handsome face passively calm.

"I . . . I just dropped by, Jack. I couldn't sleep for . . . for thinking. I was afraid you would be in bed. . . ."

"Beverly's asleep!" Drake announced crisply.

"Of course, Jack. I can speak to you out here. I've . . . I've been worrying. Sheriff Hamilton dropped by this morning . . . yesterday morning now, I guess. We went with him, Zuelda and I, to his office . . ."

Drake grunted. "So that's

where you were. I stopped by to see you."

Ben's face lighted. He sat down on the kitchen step.

"He said he'd talked to you. I was wondering what you made of this drowning business."

Drake leaned in the doorway.

"Some fool of an intern got hold of the wrong corpse, naturally. Hamilton will probably get a corrected report next week. A man doesn't drown in thin air."

Ben got to his feet. He looked reassured.

"You don't think there was an assailant lurking in the thicket . . . ?"

"With a bucket of water?" Drake snorted.

Ben grinned . . . almost, it seemed to Drake, as if with relief.

"Okay, you win! I'd better be getting back. I left my car down at the end of the street . . . didn't want to wake you if you were sleeping . . ."

He turned and walked off into the dark.

"Liar!" Drake thought. He stared into the dark, though Ben Harrian was no longer visible. "I'd give a nickel to know just why you *were* hanging around here!"

Drake locked the kitchen door and went into the living room. The mantel clock pointed to ten minutes past two.

Drake continued to muse about Ben Harrian as he undressed for bed. There was that dark, sombre air about him that he didn't understand, for one thing. Take Zuelda, now . . . her face was like an open book. She was everything her husband was not . . . so full of life and the love of living . . . but what was the almost passionate affection she expressed for Bevely, a faint glow of which he seemed to feel washed over upon himself? Both the Harrians seemed unusually devoted to the Drakes, though their acquaintanceship was short indeed.

A PROFOUND weariness assaulted Drake's frame. He started as he suddenly recalled the gushing flood in the kitchen. He had been so intent on concealing its presence from Ben that it had slipped his own mind until just now.

What manner of horror was it he had witnessed . . . what dark rite had he interrupted by his untimely return? Could that rush of . . . of water, wasn't it? . . . have any relationship to *them* . . . be one of them?

How could he ever sleep again with so frightful a question unanswered? He looked at Beverly, the sweet outline of her cheek cuddled against the pillow . . . then the segmented parts of his night's experience clashed in his brain, burst into jumbled frag-

ments that whirled madly and exploded in ribbons of incandescence upon the darkness of his mind. Drake toppled over in inert slumber.

There were thundershowers the next day, and Drake mooned around the house, hating the inclement weather. He blamed his feelings on a night of poor sleep, not realizing he had scarcely slept at all. His mind was confused with a chaotic non-remembrance of racing dreams from which he could isolate no single bizarre scene. He looked out the window at the rain puddles in the yard and street, remembering those other puddles with a vicious kind of wonder.

Drake had little enough to say to Beverly, and she seemed to respect his reticence, though with a puzzled crease between her eyes.

"You've not been feeling well lately, John. I think you ought to stay home from the office tomorrow . . . take another day of rest . . ."

He shrugged, switched on the TV and settled himself for a dull afternoon. By and by, the sun came out, the landscape steamed itself dry, and Drake went out for a walk.

He felt impelled, somehow, to stroll up toward the thickety ridge, in the direction Tom Ellers had taken. There was nothing in the wood but damp humus and puddles that glistened among the scrub. The earth was unaccountably dry in a clearing among the brush. It looked somehow familiar, then Drake remembered that here was where they had found Ellers' body.

He threw himself on the ground to rest, turned his eyes up to the sky and balefully studied the few woolly clouds that still lingered after the rain. He was troubled in mind and spirit, possessed of a wonder that went deeply and acutely into his perceptions. He wondered what this impelling wonder was . . . nothing had been the same since Tom Ellers had come up here on the hill and died . . . had drowned in a sea of dry grass, brush and trees. . . . .

Somehow, Drake felt no sense of personal danger from his surroundings. He was completely detached from the physical world as he wrestled with a thing that was in his mind alone. He let his thoughts drift over the events of the night of Ellers' death, tried to correlate them into something that resembled coherence.

The clouds drifted by as the sun declined. Slowly, Drake drifted away and away, until finally he slept in complete exhaustion of brain and body.

DRAKE felt as if he were floating. A strange, bluish luminescence engulfed him, a

sparkling blueness, alive with a strange, vital sort of sentience. The sparkles waxed and waned in the blueness, and he was conscious of dim, blue shapes that swam around him. He saw their glistening eyes as they peered at him, felt the presence of naked bodies close to his own, stirring the sluggish medium in which he seemed to float.

Somehow, Drake did not care. He contemplated his surroundings with a mindless apathy. "I'm dreaming, of course," he thought, as one thinks in dreams. "I should wake up and get back to the house. Beverly will be wondering where I am."

But he made no effort to extricate himself from the dream. He allowed himself to drift, blissfully at peace, fully relaxed, a floating mote, an atom, a wretched shell of nothing among the glimmering shapes of the blue void.

Drake's perceptions seemed to sharpen after a time. The limits of the void extended themselves to floor, walls, ceiling. He was in an eerie, blue-lit cavern . . . the light which lit it he knew had no physical existence, but was merely an impression of his mind, reaching out with some other-sense to palp the eternal gloom of this rift in the limestone womb of the earth. He smiled to himself for dreaming such a bizarre thing as this, knowing that he dreamed, but accepting the dream for fact, nonetheless.

He seemed to float midway between the floor of the cavern and its stalactite encrusted ceiling. The female shapes, with here and there among them the arrowing form of a male figure, swarmed around him, above, below and on both sides. He became aware then of a thrumming and humming that existed in his mind alone, as the images of the cavern-creatures existed, a wavering chorus of melody which he identified as coming from the throng about him.

The dream-people were singing to him—a song that welcomed him to the blue-lit cavern under the earth. There was a pathos in their welcome, and a sweetness, and a lulling lure that made his presence there a thing of desire to him.

All at once, a single figure swam out of the crowding myriad, a dainty figure, her hair a cloud of shadow that caressed her shoulders, floated on the too-heavy medium of the cavern atmosphere. Her arms moved slowly, with sinuous grace, as if she actually swam in something that was as if it were water . . . though even Drake's sleeping mind rejected the thought, for he breathed, and the air of Earth was his medium.

There was something vaguely familiar about the elfin features

that closely and more closely approached his own, but his mind was dulled, and he could not place the familiarity of her. She hovered above him—he could have touched her simply by lifting his hand, but he lacked the will to do so. Her hair floated around small, piquant features, blue-gleaming, shapely shoulders. The points of her tiny breasts pressed almost against him.

Her lips smiled, and her eyes caressed him voluptuously. He heard the murmur of her voice deep in his mind, and his perceptions fled before the ecstasy of promise in her words.

"Tonight, while the undines dance, my love . . . I'll wed you and you'll wed me, as it was done when the world was young . . ."

Drake threshed, aflame with desire, as her lips met his and clung. He flung his arms up to embrace her, but he embraced nothing, and awoke in the still darkness of the thicket.

He rolled over and sat up, head swimming, eyes still blinded by the blue glare of the dream-cavern. The world was a silent, breathless place, peopled with moveless shadows among the scrub, gashed by the glare of the rising moon . . . a full moon tonight . . . a glowing orb that spectacularly lightened the sky to dusty blue and paled the stars.

Drake made to stand, but for some odd reason, his legs refused to support him. He sat panting, his mind's eye still aglow with that world of dream, his inner ear vibrating yet to the luring promise of the witch with the floating hair . . . the strangely familiar witch who promised herself to him body and . . .

The moon rose higher and higher on his dazed musing . . . and the dance of the undines began.

He noticed suddenly how the moonlight sparkled on pools of water that nestled among the scrub. All at once, ripples beset the surfaces of them, though there was no breeze, so that they shimmered and winked like glowing eyes in the darkness . . . like giant jewels flung strew by some sublime hand.

The pools stirred . . . and moved. They shifted position with wills of their own, rose in mounds, then in dripping columns and bulging shapes that spun and glistened in the moonlight. Then began a slow, erratic motion, from moon-bright night to densest shadow, back and forth, gliding, slithering, bending, twisting . . . and slowly the undine shapes took form, became as lovely women, bending and swaying in rhythmic dance. He was swept away by the sight of them in their nakedness, by the song to which they danced, and

he became as elemental as these creatures from the bluelit limestone cavern under the earth . . . which he knew now had been no dream.

The woman-shapes trouped around him, unearthly in their beauty, breathing the breath of ecstasy into their song. They bent above him, caressing. . . .

A SINGLE light glowed in the living-room window of the Drake house, where Beverly, worried and alone, tried to read a magazine. John had been gone all afternoon and evening . . . it was nearly midnight.

She fought against the clammy fingers of cold fear that persisted in gripping her. John had gone off today into the thicket . . . as Tom Ellers had gone . . . she cast the thought out of her mind. John would have had no reason to stay this long in such a wild place, she told herself. He could have come out of the thicket at any one of a hundred different places. Perhaps he had taken a notion to stroll over to the Harrian's . . . the silent telephone mocked her. She could comfort herself, at least, with the thought that perhaps he had. If she called and found that he had not . . . her heart stilled . . . then raced at sound of a step on the porch.

The door rattled in its frame, and a feeling of glad relief thrust through her. Then a natural caution asserted itself. John would be proud of her for her discretion if she called out first . . .

"Who's there?"

Totally unexpected, Zuelda's voice answered her, muffled by the heavy panel of the door.

"It's Ben and Zuelda, Bev. Let us in, please . . . quickly!"

Zuelda's voice was not loud, but distraught. Beverly opened up. Zuelda hurled herself into the room, followed closely by her tall, handsome husband.

"When I first heard your knock, I thought . . ." Beverly began.

"You thought it was Jack!" Zuelda cried. "We know he's gone. Bev . . . something terrible is happening . . ."

Beverly felt her throat contract.

"Has something . . . happened to John . . . ?"

She felt faint. She groped behind her for the davenport and collapsed, stricken, horror staring out of her eyes.

Ben was briskly reassuring.

"Not at all! Beverly! Jack's all right, do you hear me?"

The meaning of his words slowly sank in and color returned to Beverly's cheeks. She gulped. Ben's voice was soothing, gentle, curiously lulling.

Ben turned to Zuelda. "Don't excite her, dear. Would you like a drink?" he asked Bev.

Beverly shook her head word-

lessly, wide-eyed. She sat up straight.

"What about . . . John? Tell me!"

Ben looked at slim, well-kept hands. Zuelda fluttered like a small, frightened bird. She flew to Beverly's side, twittering almost, comforting with her arms.

"What I have to say is going to be difficult for you to understand. Bev. You must forget everything you have been taught as truth and fact . . . and remember that the scientists do not yet have the universe trapped in a test tube and wrapped up in a coil of wire.

"A long, long time ago, Bev, the world was much different from the world you know. I don't mean it was less civilized, or anything like that, which you know well enough. Perhaps I can make it plain this way—from childhood, you have been familiar with so-called fables and myths of the ancient world . . . of gods and goddesses, pixies, fairies, fauns, and so on. You must believe me when I say that the fables are founded on solid fact."

Beverly looked puzzled. "What has this to do with John?"

"I am getting to that. You must understand this part first. In the very long ago of which I was speaking, men knew the truth of these things I am telling you, because they actually associated with the beings who later became known as gods, goddesses, and so on.

"In those years, the streams, ponds, rivers and underground watercourses of the Earth were populated by a race of elemental beings called undines . . . popularly represented as being entirely female, but there were males among them too, naturally."

"You say these things are fact," Beverly put in. "How do you know?"

Ben smiled slightly. "My dear, I am a student of the . . . occult . . . a vastly misunderstood word, by the way. It simply means hidden. All my life, I have studied the hidden things . . . the things that are true but not evident, simply because people refuse to believe in them. The undines may be included in this classification, and they still exist in spite of man's stupid ignorance of them."

His mouth set in a thin, hard line. He mused on his next words.

"We have been watching your house every night, Zuelda and I, since the night Tom Ellers was drowned by the undines."

Beverly straightened with a gasp.

"It wasn't . . . his heart?"

"I assume John did not tell you. But you must know now. It is important. The undines drown-

ed Ellers because it is their simplest and most effective means of attack against human beings. The fact that Ellers was drowned in a perfectly dry area gave me my first clue that it was the work of undines.

"You see," Ben went on, "the undines have for many centuries been forced to live away from the habitat of man. Man's attitude toward them . . . his vain pretense of enlightenment . . . made further contact between the two races impossible. In places far from men, some undines still people the surface waters of Earth, but there are many of them, and not enough isolated waters. So many, indeed, have taken to the streams and pockets of water under the earth. Occasionally, some of them come to the surface, take on human form and mingle a while with men, but they cannot stay too long away from their natural medium . . . a few months at most. In order to stay longer requires the peculiar spiritual nature possessed by man alone."

"I don't understand," Beverly interrupted quietly.

"You have heard a great deal of talk," Ben shrugged, "about something called the human soul. It is not exactly what you and the greater part of mankind think it is . . . there are not even words in the language to describe its exact nature. Anyway, no undine possesses this something called a soul."

A light of dawning comprehension gleamed in Beverly's blue eyes.

"I know! They can get a soul by marrying a human being!"

BEN smiled again, slowly. "That is how the fables phrase it. It is true in a sense, but only in the manner of speaking. We are speaking of perfectly natural powers now, and not of mythical beings and mythical souls. The human soul, as we must call it, is as real as the electricity that lights that lamp. It is a force or power that can be used, transferred, and otherwise treated like any other source of energy.

"The undines have a ritual of marriage with human beings, by which the mind-force of the group acts upon the individual human being to absorb him or her into the race of undines. In doing so, the human being is forced to give up that focus of living energy he calls his soul, which may then be trapped into the service of a waiting undine. Have I made myself clear?"

Beverly stared. Her mouth worked. "This . . . this marriage ceremony is some kind of witchcraft that will change a man into an undine . . . and the undine he 'marries', into a human being with a soul?"

"Precisely! Tonight, the undines celebrate the marriage of their queen with your husband."

Beverly's eyes blazed. Her lips tightened, white-edged.

"She can't do that! John is married to *me!*"

"The marriage of the undines is only a travesty on human marriage. The two have nothing in common. Unless we act to prevent it, the queen of the undines tonight will gain a soul . . . and Jack will become an immortal, soulless undine."

He held up a warning hand as Beverly attempted to speak.

"We've been watching, as I said before, and twice already—last night and the night before—Jack has kept a secret rendezvous with the undines in the thicket, where they have made an entrance to their watery world under the surface. Tonight is the last night . . . your husband is with them now. We need your help, Zuelda and I . . . we need your human soul as a catalyst in what we have to do. Will you come with us into the thicket . . . now?"

There was a long silence. Beverly said, hollowly, "I . . . I can't believe a word you've said! I . . ."

"Don't try. Just come with us and do as I tell you."

"Now . . . ?"

"Now! . . . You want to save Jack's life, don't you?"

The bluntness of his statement shattered her reserve, penetrated where his other arguments had not. She acquiesced with vehemence. A minute later, the three picked their way cautiously through the moonlight and shadow of the dreaming thicket.

At first, Beverly could see nothing but a moonlit glade among the scrub, grass blades turned to the moon, glowing as if powdered with diamond dust. Beyond the glade, the shadows were deep and dark, and there was an uncanny stillness on the warm night air.

Ben halted her with a light touch, whispered to her to sit. Beverly obeyed, puzzled, frightened, as she peered out on the empty glade. Then Ben Harrian leaned over her and murmured something softly, a few syllables she did not quite catch. Before Beverly could ask him to repeat, she drew her breath in sharply at sight of the dancing figures, afire with moonglow, with which the glade seemed to be filled.

"These are the undines," Ben hissed. "Watch them well! Remain here . . . don't move or make a sound, no matter what you may see or hear. Remember . . . your husband's life is at stake out there . . ."

Then she heard the brush rustle softly as Ben departed in one direction and Zuelda in another, circling the glade as if to surround it with the three of them.

Moment by moment her eyes accustomed themselves to the treacherous light. Now she made out more plainly the dancing troupe, saw their nakedness, the lasciviousness of their gestures and dance. She could not guess how many there were . . . perhaps a couple of dozen . . . perhaps as many as fifty or more. That they were lovely she could see at a glance . . . lovely, graceful, and possessed of an appeal that made even her pulses quicken.

WITH joyous abandon, the undines danced in the moonlight, and, as if from far away, the sound of their singing penetrated to the ear of her mind, wailing and wonderful, utterly sweet beyond measure, throbbing with undertones of passion and grief.

It seemed to Beverly that the words of the song were half understood by her, and the undines were wailing their farewell to the queen they loved, promising a welcome to the one who was to take her place among them.

The dancing group swirled apart for a moment, and Beverly saw her husband, seated on the floor of the glade. His face was toward her, but lifted, so that the moon caught his expression in full brillance, and she saw his lips parted in a grimace of ecstasy, his hands clutching the turf with agonized fervor.

Beverly's breath came in short gasps. She felt sticky and wet with a perspiration of anxiety. She leaned forward, peering through the shadows of the scrub, into that moonlit glade in the heart of the thicket.

Around and around the undines danced, their song growing louder, trilling more sweetly as it filled with the ecstasy of the marriage bed. The bride was coming, the song related, to meet her groom.

The bride—it must be she, Beverly thought with a jealous pang—drifted from the press of dancers, alone into the center of the circle they made. Which it was, Beverly could not tell, for the creature had her back turned, her dark hair a floating cloud about her naked shoulders. Her body swayed voluptuously to the tempo of the dance; her arms and legs writhed to the pulse of melody. The queen of the undines approached Drake, who awaited her in eager expectation.

Beverly's breath caught in her throat. It was all she could do to keep from crying out and rushing into the glade. She restrained herself with an effort, trembling, panting, her eyes straining to realize the tableau.

Any woman would know what the dancer's gestures meant . . . and Beverly shuddered with re-

vulsion as she saw her husband responding. Slowly the undine bride with averted face circled her waiting groom; then she seemed to melt downward as she flung herself writhing at Drake's feet. Her body twisted—white arms reached out to embrace him as he hurled himself upon her.

Harsh upon the sudden stillness that followed cessation of the undine song, a man's voice boomed across the clearing. Beverly started with wonder and relief. It was Ben's voice, and he was chanting something not understandable, a semi-song of rolling syllables that had the sound of some ancient tongue long dead upon the face of the Earth.

What she expected, Beverly did not know, but she was not prepared for the sudden vanishment that occurred. One moment, the undines circled in a refulgent splendor of silvery flesh, in their midst an obscene spectacle of lewdness against which Beverly shut her eyes in horror and disgust. When she looked again, impelled by the silence, the glade was empty, a slice of moonlight carved out of the shadow.

Beverly fainted then, and was only dimly conscious of Ben's arms supporting her as he carried her back through the thicket to the house. She was also vaguely aware of softly thuddeng footsteps that followed, Zuelda's footsteps, light and indistinct on the deadening humus.

"Put her in the bedroom," Zuelda directed crisply, turning on the lights as they went through the house.

Ben deposited his burden on the bed and turned to leave the room.

"Undress her. She will be all right. She is sleeping naturally."

He went out and waited in the living room, turning off the overhead light, leaving the room dimly lit by a small television lamp on the console. Zuelda joined him softly.

He whirled, seized her arms in a fierce paroxysm of passion. His eyes gleamed fervidly in the half-light. Zuelda did not draw away. She collapsed against him, turned her face up to his with a smile of luxurious triumph. Her eyes were half-veiled, somnolent, flickering with nameless fires.

"How does it feel?" he cried hoarsely, devouring her with his eyes. *"How does it feel?"*

She laughed throatily, did a dancing pirouette out of his grasp, and threw herself breathless on the davenport.

"Not like going through the sump pump last night. That *tickled!"*

"You tried to rush things last night," he accused her. "You put us off a whole day."

"What is a day . . . in eternity?"

He regarded her somberly, half across the space of the living room.

"You *can* feel it?"

"Of course I can! You will know what it feels like . . . by and by . . ."

He lunged at her, seized her shoulders, shook her.

"Tell me!"

She arched her back, like a cat stretching. Her mouth was red and wide with soundless laughter, eyes closed to gleaming slits.

"Wonderful, darling! Oh . . . wonderful . . . to have a soul!"

He retreated, an enigmatic smile twisting his handsome, unhuman face. He cocked his head listening.

"It is worth the trouble then . . . and now, the undines sing . . ."

The undines were outside the house and in it, below it and on all sides, dancing their endless dance, trilling the bridal song of the blue-lit caverns of limestone far down in the earth.

Ben squared his shoulders, murmured to his wife.

"Now that *you* have a soul, you will be the catalyst for me . . ."

His eyes held hers and she laughed without sound again, red lips parted, pointed white teeth gleaming in the lamplight.

"Hurry . . ." she whispered, ". . . and come back to me!"

The somberly handsome undine turned, stepped toward the bedroom. . . .

JOHN DRAKE opened his eyes in the cavern of blue spangles and encrusted limestone walls. Full memory was his now. The charm that had held him powerless had acted upon that other side of him . . . that part of him which was his no longer. He was an undine . . . as soulless as these others who swam around him, peering curiously, pathetically half-afraid, wishing to make him welcome, yet not daring the possibility of his wrath.

It was peculiar, Drake thought, that he did not feel angry. He fully understood how he had been duped, and by whom, but his mind viewed the situation with a logical philosophy. He

was without emotion . . . and it occurred to him that perhaps that had been taken from him, along with that other . . . his soul. The word echoed flatly in the corridors of his thinking.

The tragic enormity of his transgression in the ethereal glade he reviewed with a calm deliberation. He remembered well the dancing undines, the poignant sweetness of their song, remembered again the ecstasy of that joyous embrace of the queen of the water-world . . . then he felt again in memory the sharp pangs of dissolution, felt himself flowing away into the dark earth, a watery substance that fled through minute interstices of the clay, into the phosphorescent blue sanctuary of the limestone underworld.

Remorse and disgust bit him, these being not emotions but states of mind. He knew that the life force . . . the soul . . . erstwhile his, now caressed the body and spirit of Zuelda Harrian, while her husband . . . he knew that, too.

The undines flashed away from him as he moved suddenly . . . and then he heard them singing again, their unheard voices lifted in the pagan lilt of their betrothal song.

He knew he must go . . . or spend eternity in this blue-lit water-world with Beverly . . . and the undines.

The throng was streaming away from him now, arrowing upward in full song, and Drake hurtled in the midst of them, came out with them in the moonlit glade, and flowed down the thicketed slope toward the lighted house.

Drake cast his other-sense ahead of him, palping the night for the last act of this unhuman drama.

While the undines danced, he glided and ran. He was half a man-shape when he reached the house, a water blob of a man that shone in the unwavering moonlight. He found the door and hurled it open, flung himself into the living room.

Zuelda sat with eyes closed upon the davenport, attuned to the rapture of the undine song. Drake's uncouth entry startled her into outcry. She flung herself erect.

"Jack!"

Drake halted. "So you were my bride tonight." He chuckled obscenely. "I rather think you left me at the altar, my dear!"

"No!" she gasped. *"No!"*

She voiced not a denial of his statement, but a frantic rejection of the intent she read in his mind.

"You wouldn't *dare!*"

"But I would dare," Drake mimicked her tone softly. "You forgot a few things, my pretty

bride. You forgot that when you took the vital essence of my life, you took also the means by which you could control me!"

Her eyes were big and dark, pits of smouldering despair. She backed in a half-circle around him. The blood had drained from her face, taking with it her sparkling vivacity, the color of her beauty, leaving her cheeks sallow, sagging, quivering with alarm.

"I'm going to do to you," he said deliberately, "what you did to Tom Ellers out there in the thicket. Because he had a soul . . . and was human . . . he could die. You killed him then, because he came upon you taking form in the glade, and he knew you for what you are . . ." He chuckled with a tinge of bitterness. "Poor old devil . . . you were using him just for show to work me into the proper psychological mood, but you forgot to control him. Maybe if it hadn't been for him, I wouldn't have had enough on my mind to come back here from your blue cavern . . ." He paused.

"Jack!" Zuelda whispered desperately. "Ben is in the bedroom with . . ."

He laughed savagely.

"Another thing you forget, Zuelda . . . that I am an undine now. I can see where poor humans can not. He is standing on the other side of the door, in quite as much of a funk as you are. But *you* have the soul, see? My soul . . . and I want it back. You can die now, remember, like Tom Ellers died . . ."

"If you kill me," she whispered in ghastly panic, "you will lose your soul forever!"

"You won't die, my dear. I won't let you . . . not for a long time. Drowning is not a pleasant death . . . but you wouldn't know anything about dying. You will learn, though . . . or go back to your hole in the ground!"

She moved swiftly to dart past him, into the kitchen. Drake elongated his body into a shining ribbon of water. A watery pseudopod burst from his side and plunged against her face, choking the scream that welled into her throat. His other hand, semi-solid, held her fast.

"I wish the sheriff could see this," he murmured into her threshing hair. "He'd see how a man can drown without getting his clothes wet!"

Zuelda struggled piteously, floundering in his aqueous grip.

The bedroom door burst open. Ben Harrian was wild-eyed, ferocious of contenance.

"Will she let me kill her, Ben?" Drake taunted.

Alarm flooded Ben's unhumanly handsome features.

"Don't do it, Jack!"

"She can give it up . . . if she

wants to. She is drowning now, Ben."

Ben didn't move. He called out, "Zuelda!"

The sound of water gargling in Zuelda's lungs was horrid answer to his call.

"Zuelda! Don't let him do it, darling! Give it up . . . hear? Let him have the damned thing back . . . it's probably bound for Hell, anyway!" He glared fiercely at Drake's shining form. "Give it back to him, and we'll go back to our world and our people together . . ."

Zuelda relaxed in Drake's grip. Her body began to lose form and substance. He knew that she had assented to her husband's plea with the last gasp of life in her tissues. Drake held his grip. He must not let go too soon.

The undine was a column of madly churning water between his hands. The base of it spread; the water-column collapsed . . . and *something* came out of it, like the song comes out of a bird, boisterous, vital, filled with a splendor of being.

Drake caught it, enfolded it with himself, made himself whole once more.

He stood erect, his hands empty. He was solid flesh and blood, sturdy boned . . . and only now did he know in full how much he had lost . . . and how much regained . . .

He swayed, naked in his own living room. There were no dancing undines anywhere. Zuelda was gone. Ben was gone. There was only a lilting splash of water flowing down the kitchen steps, and then that was gone.

Drake found that he was shaking. He went into the bedroom, looked down at Beverly sleeping, touched the soft, pale curve of her cheek. The westering moon shone full upon her. Her lips tilted in a tender smile, as if in her dreams she responded to a suggestive, unheard song . . .

"She knows," Drake thought, "but she won't remember . . . I can thank them for that, at least. I won't have to tell her, either . . . and I won't . . ."

He half-turned, cocked an ear toward the thickety ridge, seeing again the passionate surge of the undines' dance, hearing the elfin lure of their song. But it was only in fancy that he saw and heard. All was silent . . . no, not silent . . . there was sound that came to his earthly ears . . . the shrill music of tree frogs, the trilling of crickets, and booming above them all, the rasping scream of a cicada as it yielded its life to the predacious assault of some horny-limbed horror in the moonlight.

The Predestined

BY Q. PATRICK

His schoolmaster prophesied that Jasper would go a long way; but did not say in which direction.

I

IT WAS Jasper's tenth birthday. There had been strawberries and cream for tea on the lawn, and a party of nice-mannered boys and girls had solemnly presented him with gifts and wished him many happy returns.

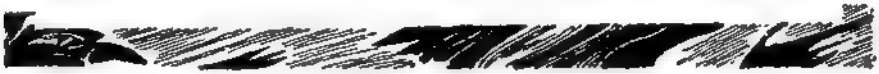
But Jasper, an ungracious host, had shown more interest in the strawberries and the gifts than in his guests' comfort. In fact, there had been a scuffle with a diminutive female guest, whose pigtails he had so continually tweaked that she had rounded upon him in a sudden burst of impolite ferocity.

Now that the avenger had departed along with the other guests, Jasper seemed the prey to the listlessness of bored repletion. His grandmother was watching him anxiously.

"Is your new collar too tight?" she asked solicitously, as Jasper unloosened his birthday tie and was unbuttoning his first really "grown-up" shirt. "Come here, my dear, and let me look."

Jasper, a handsome, heavy boy, moved sulkily towards her.

"Why, good gracious, your poor neck is all black and blue! Did that horrid little Richards girl scratch you, darling?" Grandmother shook her gray curls as she examined the ugly



reddish-blue weal on Jasper's throat. "It can't be the shirt: I bought it large on purpose to allow for growth. Does it hurt you, my pet?"

Jasper gave a non-committal groan. An orphan child, living alone with a doting grandmother, he knew that slight indispositions often had their concomitant advantages; such as pleasant pamperings, tempting food and freedom from school. On the other hand—

"Or perhaps it's strawberry rash. Your poor father always used to break out after strawberries. It's just struck eight, and if we hurry we'll be in time to catch Dr. Barnes. He usually stays late in his surgery Saturday nights."

Jasper was not so pleased at this. Dr. Barnes was apt to pooh-pooh childish malingerings and to prescribe nasty medicines. But this time his neck really *did* hurt him quite badly—a sort of chokey feeling. Perhaps he was going to be ill after all.

A few minutes later Dr. Barnes was casting a professional eye over Jasper.

"Where did you say the rash was, Mrs. Dogarty? I can't see anything."

"It wasn't exactly a rash; it was a sort of mark—more like a bruise." She moved nearer, peering through thick spectacles. "Well, bless me, it's gone completely. It must have been a trick of light. My eyes are not what they were."

"But it hurt," put in Jasper.

"Well it doesn't hurt any more." Dr. Barnes gave him a playful pinch. "Tummy's a bit fat, but—all's well that ends well."

He might have added, "And all's bad that begins badly."

II

ON THE last Saturday of the Summer Term, Dr. Hodson, Headmaster of St. Ewold's School, made a habit of inviting the ten senior boys to a buffet supper at his home. From among these he would choose the prefects for the coming year, to supplant those who were leaving. And, being a wise man, he valued the opinion of his wife and daughters in making his selections.

Like soldiers on parade the boys had lined up outside the Headmaster's door, sleek and shiny as soap, shoe-polish and brilliantine could make them. Jasper, third in line of seniority, longed for (and fully expected) the honor of prefecture, with its privileges, comforts and potentialities of dominance. He had, perhaps, thought too little of its responsibilities.

On the stroke of eight, the senior boy knocked at the Head-

master's door. As he did so there was a choking sound, and he turned to see Dogarty staggering out of line, clutching feverishly at his collar and pulling at the neat knot of his tie.

"Fall out, Dogarty," hissed the senior boy.

The Mesdames Hodson were extremely polite in accepting Jasper's apologies for being late. But their eagle eyes had taken note of the unbuttoned collar, barely hidden by the crooked tie. Nor did his hair have that Guardsman "spit-and-polish" to which these critical ladies were accustomed on such near-formal occasions.

"I don't think so much of your Dogarty," said Mrs. Hodson, after the boys had bowed themselves politely out at ten o'clock.

"Not mine, my dear," said the Headmaster, with his famous, whimsical smile, "but St. Ewold's. A good scholar and a good athlete, handsome, but—"

"Handsome is as handsome does," put in the youngest and most tactless of the girls. "And Handsome didn't offer me any of that trifle, though he took two helpings himself."

"His eyes are too close together," said the eldest daughter, "and his mouth is too red for a boy's. Besides—if he can't tie his own tie properly, how can he make other boys do it? Jones mi. told me he was a bully; and he's not a bit popular—"

Here the Headmaster held up his hand with his oft-repeated adjuration against telling tales either in or out of school. Then he added, "Well, I think Dogarty may go a long way—a very long way." But he did not say in which direction.

However, it came to pass that, despite his fine athletic record and a brilliant scholarship to Cambridge, Jasper Dogarty never had his name inscribed amongst those who had been prefects at St. Ewold's.

III

MAY Week at Cambridge, with examinations over and dreamy, sunny days . . . punting along the Cam . . . moonlit nights with their gay college dances . . . the announcement of optimistic engagements . . . with Youth having a final, carefree fling before stepping out from the sheltered groves of Academe into the cold, withering realities of everyday life.

And to Jasper these realities might well prove withering and cold. His grandmother's legacy —aided by his Scholarship—had barely seen him through Cambridge. A double first and the glamor surrounding a "rugger blue" are valuable in their way. But their value so often dies

with the shouting and the tumult of graduation, and they are no guarantees of a safe, remunerative job later on. Unless, of course, they have enabled one to find the right connections.

And here Jasper had been lucky, or perhaps clever. Though not generally popular, he had managed to secure the friendship of Douglas Mervyn, who had good-naturedly invited him to share his suite of rooms in Trumpington Street, and, more good-naturedly, had invited him to his home during the long vacations. Here Jasper had made good ground with Sir Montague Mervyn, the great industrialist, and also with his only daughter, Eunice. Jasper had managed to convince himself that he would have been genuinely in love with Eunice, even if her father had not been in a position to find a good job for any worthy young man he fancied, and, of course, an even better situation for a son-in-law. Jasper felt sure that Eunice, for all her Puritanical upbringing and her ice-clear, gray eyes, was not indifferent to him. For now that the too-red mouth with its petulant lower lip had been brought under control, his perfect physique and regular features were enough to cause a flutter in an even more sternly-disciplined heart than Eunice's.

He would have brought matters to a head that last Saturday afternoon in May Week, as they punted down to Byron's pool between the daisied banks of the Cam. But Eunice—wise girl—had brought along her Pekinese, Snap, who had a knack of creating some diversion whenever relations threatened to become too intimate. And Jasper was required to praise the cleverness of some canine antic, when he would willingly have drowned the little dog in those deep waters traditionally loved by Lord Byron.

BUT he would have his chance with Eunice that night at the Trinity Ball. Jasper had hired "tails" for the occasion, and their perfect fit had given him much satisfaction when he had tried them on that morning. Eunice could not fail to notice the figure he would cut in comparison with less favored undergraduates—including even her short, cheerfully-chubby brother, Douglas.

Before the dance they were invited to dine with the Dean of Trinity, and Douglas had assembled his party of men and maidens a little before eight. Eunice was there with Snap, who was to be left in charge of the landlady. In the adjoining bedroom Jasper was putting the finishing touches to his toilet. He was nervous and somewhat afraid.

He had learnt by now that nervous strain—especially in the evening—was apt to bring on that queer constriction of the throat, followed by a short emotional spasm when he was hardly responsible for his actions.

The College clock struck eight.

"We'll be late, and the Dean's a stickler for punctuality," said Douglas, moving towards the bedroom door.

His sister restrained him, laughingly. "Let's send little Snappy boy in to hurry him up." Eunice opened the door just wide enough for the Pekinese to enter.

There was a sound of playful yapping and then a howl of pain. The door was flung wide open and the dog hurtled across the room with Jasper's patent-leathered foot behind it.

"Damn that blasted dog! And damn, triple damn this cursed collar!"

Jasper stood in the doorway. In his hired "tails," he was fully dressed, except for the side of his butterfly collar which he had wrenched loose from the stud.

His eyes were wild and there was an ugly weal on his neck and throat. Oblivious of the ladies, he stood like the mad Hercules pouring his oaths out to heaven and hell.

Then there was a moment of stunned silence, broken only by the whimpering of the dog.

Finally Douglas stammered, "Look here, old man, this won't —er do, you know—"

But Jasper did not listen. He had gone back into the bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

He never saw Eunice Mervyn again.

IV

AT THIRTY-FOUR Jasper Dogarty could hardly be called a success. His latest job of selling on commission for a large Perfume Company barely paid for the single Bloomsbury room and the commonest necessities of life. It did not cover the rich foods, the pink gins and the double whiskies to which he had become increasingly addicted. But it had one advantage. It brought him into contact with rich — usually older — women who could supply many such little luxuries, and who were, if carefully handled, good for an occasional "present" which, if not in actual cash, could be translated into such beneath the three balls. But suddenly, it seemed, women had become more sensible, or less sensitive to Jasper's attractions. Invitations were falling off. He was even reduced to paying for his own drinks and dinner three nights in succession. His bathroom

mirror finally told him the reason. He was getting fat—yes, F-A-T, fat. There was even a suspicion of a double chin, and no doubt at all about his receding hair-line.

He must, he told himself, perpetrate the only dishonesty that he had not as yet tried with the opposite sex. He must get married—and fast.

Quickly, almost feverishly, he reviewed his list of matrimonial prospects.

A few weeks later he was the husband of Sophie Cain, a widow ten years his senior, who enjoyed comfortable ill-health, a more than comfortable income and a magnificent Mayfair flat.

Other appurtenances of wealth included an almost new Rolls Royce and a nearby doctor who, cheerfully and unashamedly, pandered to her hypochondria.

Such things were, however, mere baubles of a temporal nature. Sophie Cain, now Dogarty, had spiritual wealth, too—a sincere, if rather narrow, religious creed, and the services of a more devout, far narrower female companion—Miss Grace Goodman. In fact, this lady went so far as to assert that anything enjoyable must *ipso facto* be sinful.

Jasper's bathroom mirror had driven him to matrimony so precipitously that he had had no time to find out that he would be obliged to take on not only the assets but also the liabilities of his beloved. Both her income and her capital were untouchable during her lifetime, and, though she consented to make a will largely in his favor, she insisted that Miss Goodman should continue to run the household and hold tight upon the purse-strings. And that lady, as may well be surmised, had declared war from the first moment that Jasper appeared in the bridegroom role. Indeed, after the ceremony, she showed her disapproving contempt of the hymeneal bonds by constantly referring to *Mrs. Cain's* car, *Mrs. Cain's* flat, and even to *Mrs. Cain's* husband. She ordered groceries for Mrs. Cain, and since the creed of both ladies forbade alcoholic beverages of any kind, no provisions along those lines were made for Mr. Dogarty.

Jasper, shorter of pocket money than ever, found what solace he could in flaunting the Rolls Royce before his former "customers," and in the convivial atmosphere of Dr. Belk's flat, which was immediately below his own. The latter, his wife's physician, was a cheerful old rascal, who soon showed that he was more than ready to enter with Jasper into a defensive alliance against Miss Grace Goodman.

"What your wife really needs is cheering up a bit," said Dr. Belk, as he and Jasper sipped their drinks one evening. "But old goody-goody Goodman is always reminding her of her mortality and scaring the living daylights out of her. Then poor Sophie gets fluttery and sends for me. I'm almost ashamed to go as often as I do." He apparently felt no shame about the size of his monthly bill.

"My wife isn't seriously ill, then?"

"We—ll, you know how it is with women her age." The doctor spread out his hands and shrugged. "I'm not saying she doesn't need medical attention now and then. There is a little cardiac trouble. Flittery, fluttery, you know. A car accident, too hot a bath, a shock, running for a bus might bring on a syncope. But so it might with any of us. And *we* get along without Miss Goodman to pamper us and preach death and desolation to us."

Dr. Belk lifted his glass. "A little of this—a little fun now and then—theatres, dinner-parties—they would work wonders for Sophie." He winked. "Come, fill up, my boy."

Of course Jasper realized the meaning of that wink was: "Get rid of Miss Goodman and there will be the more pickings for you and me."

BUT as he thought it over, he was not sure he wanted to get rid of Miss Goodman. The doctor had given him another idea, in which Miss Goodman might be quite useful . . . quite useful for a plan he had conceived . . . a plan which, gradually, through the ensuing days was growing . . . and now beginning to take final shape in his mind. . . .

His chance came about some two weeks later when Mrs. Belk sent a polite note, asking Mr. and Mrs. Dogarty to cocktails and dinner the following Saturday.

"Do you good, dear," urged Jasper. "And the doctor wouldn't ask you if he didn't think you up to it. I've promised anyhow, but I'd hate to go and leave you all alone."

Saturday evening was proverbially Miss Goodman's night off—her only relaxation—the one period in which her argus-eyed vigilance over Sophie was abated. Every Saturday at seven she marched off on foot—scorning buses and tubes just as she scorned raincoats and umbrellas—to visit her brother in Maida Vale. It was a stern Duty; for her brother, once a missionary, had fallen from grace and needed all the spiritual succor and exhortation his sister had to offer.

Of course cocktails were out

of the question for Sophie. But Jasper could go an hour early and his wife would join the party for dinner.

Before leaving, Miss Goodman prepared a bath for her mistress (carefully testing it to body temperature), and laid out the least becoming of her evening gowns.

Jasper made a point of leaving the flat a few seconds before she did, and Miss Goodman saw him, as the lift bore her downwards, standing outside the door of the doctor's flat as if waiting for admittance. He waved her a cheerful good night, which was a mistake.

But as soon as the lift had passed, Jasper climbed the one flight of stairs to his flat and quietly let himself in. Then, noiselessly, he moved to the bedroom door and waited.

At length the faint sound of splashing told him that his wife was in her bath.

He put on his dressing-gown over his dinner jacket. Then slowly . . . silently . . . deliberately . . . he made for the half-opened bathroom door.

And slowly . . . silently . . . deliberately . . . he entered and did what he had to do.

It was as easy and quick for Jasper Dogarty as it had been for George Joseph Smith many years ago. There was no struggle as poor Sophie's head was submerged beneath the water. Only a few splashes on the floor and a few splashes on his dressing-gown were left to tell the tale.

He ran some hot water into the bath, remembering the doctor's words that too hot a bath might well cause a syncope. It would be at least an hour and a quarter before he need feign anxiety as to his wife's non-appearance at the Belks' dinner table. After that he had planned to "discover" the "accident" himself. His alibi would be almost spite-proof, and his grief more than convincing. By the time Miss Goodman returned at about eleven o'clock, any awkward questions about the temperature of the water or the splashes on the bathroom floor, etc., would be unnecessary and out of place. Sophie's body would (with good luck) have been removed, and her death certificate, duly signed by the complacent Dr. Belk, might well be a *fait accompli.*

So far so good.

HE HUNG up his dressing-gown in its usual place, and walked down to the Belks' flat, where he was admitted at less than five minutes past seven.

He was in splendid form both with his hosts and their guests. Dr. Belk kept plying his glass, whispering, "Make hay while the sun's shining, eh my boy!"

"Talking about the sun's shining," put in Mrs. Belk, "just look at that! Why, who'd have thought!"

She had pulled aside the curtain to show a sudden torrential rain storm. There were rumblings of thunder and angry tongues of lightning. It was as though Nature herself was crying vengeance for the outrage which Jasper had just perpetrated against her.

The noise was deafening. But the banging at the door and the screeching of the bell were heard above the thunder.

Instinct told Jasper what it was. Even Grace Goodman's stout heart had quailed before those drenching floods of rain. She had returned home—too early.

He was conscious of her standing in the Belks' doorway, dripping wet, screaming, "Doctor, come quick, it's Mrs. Cain—she's dead—drowned in her bath!"

Jasper gulped down his own cocktail and another one that stood nearby. Then, moving like an automaton, he followed the doctor up to his own flat.

He was a little drunk.

Much later, so it seemed, he heard the doctor's voice, rich and fruity: "Bear up, old man. I'm afraid she's gone. I always told her that she might have an attack if her bath-water was too hot. Just an accident. Too bad, too bad."

Jasper should have been grateful for the doctor's reassurance. But he sat staring in front of him, his head spinning.

A few minutes before eight o'clock, the police arrived, summoned by Miss Goodman, and again he heard her voice shrilling protestingly about the heat of the bath-water and the relatively excellent health of Mrs. Cain when she had left her.

And then Jasper was aware of a distant church clock striking eight, and a young-looking police officer was questioning him in a polite, B.B.C. voice:

"I know how you feel, Mr. Dogarty, but—"

But he did not know how Jasper felt. Only Jasper knew the feeling of that dreaded constriction round his throat—that choking sensation that had so often gripped him in moments of crisis. Instinctively his hand went up to loosen his tie and collar.

"That mark on your neck, Mr. Dogarty?" said the young officer, less polite now. "It looks freshly made—as though you'd been—er—struggling with someone."

And then Jasper, fuddled by cocktails and bewildered by Miss Goodman's accusatory screeching, made the mistake of his life—the mistake which was to cost him his life.

"Struggling! Oh no. She didn't struggle . . ."

It was only one short sentence and the young detective knew, of course, that this little slip of Jasper's tongue could not be used in evidence, since no official warning had been given. But he also knew that, in a murder case, half the battle was won if one knew the identity of the murderer.

It hardly needed the malignance of Grace Goodman to point out the financial motive; the almost scalding heat of the bath-water; the wet dressing-gown, and the (now) palpably manufactured alibi.

It was only a matter of hours before Jasper Dogarty was held without bail, charged with the murder of his wife.

V

MR. JUSTICE HARRIMAN slumped into his arm-chair before the fire in his chambers at the Old Bailey. As usual when he felt certain of a prisoner's guilt, his summing-up had been far too long—and every possible point in favor of the accused had been emphasized *ad nauseam*. He was tired, and he knew the jury was tired too, as he had kept them late into the evening. That was why he had begged them to try and reach their verdict before midnight. For tomorrow was Sunday, and no one wanted Regina v. Dogarty to stretch wearily into another week.

Thomas, the old servant, slipped in silently, removed the Judge's wig, and placed a discreet whiskey and soda on a table, convenient to his hand.

Thomas knew, partly by instinct and partly by the droop of the Judge's shoulders, that he would soon be faced with the duty that he dreaded most.

"I have an idea for your meal, my lud," he whispered. "A bit on the vulgar side, perhaps, but I'll use the best Crown silver cover, so as no one I pass in the passage will know what it is."

"Very well, Thomas." The Judge smiled mechanically.

He held out his hands before the flames. They were old, and they were very cold. This would make the thirty-fourth time that those tired old hands of his had signed away a life—sometimes young, and often potentially useful. He looked at them almost with awe.

Thirty-four—that must be just about the age of the unfortunate young man who had now faced him for four days from the Dock. Thirty-four—the same age that Gordon would have been if luck had been on his side during the Normandy landings.

He shook himself out of his reverie as Thomas came in with his supper. Whisking off the

silver cover, he announced, "Here you are, my lud. Fish and chips, and piping hot!"

He looked on, almost maternally, until Mr. Justice Harriman had consumed his plebeian repast down to the last chip.

At a few minutes before eight he was told the jury had agreed upon their verdict.

Back in the Court, his wrinkled old face was an expressionless mask, hiding the humane pity as he awaited the inevitable:

"Guilty . . ."

As the clock struck eight, he put his formal question to Jasper. Receiving no reply, he assumed the black cap and pronounced the awful words:

". . . to be hanged by the neck until you be dead . . . and may the Lord have mercy on your soul."

But Jasper was unconscious of these dreadful formalities. He had heard the eight strokes of the clock, and now his hands were at his collar, tugging violently at his shirt and tie.

It was as if he already felt the noose tightening about his neck. . . .

VI

THE Governor of Her Majesty's Prison at Brixham liked, as a rule, to get these things over early in the morning. They upset the other inmates and were bad for discipline. But Dogarty's Counsel, with unreasonable optimism, had hoped for the Home Secretary to act in this matter, and the Warden had promised him until 8 p.m. on the last day of the month.

But the Home Secretary had not acted. And so, just before eight, the Governor and his officers proceeded to Jasper's cell, where they cut off his shirt collar and pinioned his hands.

On the gallows, Jasper may have heard the first stroke of eight as they shrouded his head.

Then the trap was sprung. . . .

In the shed below, the rope was loosened from Jasper's neck. The two official doctors, waiting for the last heartbeat, looked indifferently at the ugly, bluish-red marks about his throat—those same marks that had worried the loving eyes of his grandmother at eight o'clock many evenings ago. The same marks that had caught the critical eyes of the Hodson ladies, of Eunice Mervyn, and, recently, drawn the suspicious eyes of the young police officer who had arrested him.

They were the marks of his predestination.

In the country of the head-hunting Jibaros a Big Chief controlled the spirits of the dead.

LORD OF THE TALKING HANDS

BY

ARTHUR WOODWARD

THE phone rang and the secretary announced that a man was coming up to see me. Such reports are a part of the day's business. Often they are worth while. Sometimes they are the means of acquiring valuable collections or specimens for the museum. At other times they are merely indicative of some one who wishes something identified or requires information on some Indian tribe. All are welcome.

The man who rapped timidly

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on the door and sidled furtively into the room with a small paper wrapped parcel in his hand looked to be at least sixty. His hair was white and his face thin, haggard but singularly free from wrinkles for a man of his age.

"Are you the man in charge of this department?" he asked. Again I was puzzled, for the voice was that of a man in his prime.

"Yes, sir; won't you be seated?" I responded, motioning to a guest chair near the desk.

"Are you the one who accepts things for the museum, Indian things and such-like?"

Again I nodded. "Always glad to look at anything. You have something interesting?"

He placed the small parcel on the desk.

"I—I think I have," he faltered. "Mebbe you won't think so, but if you'd care to listen a minute, that is if you have the time, it won't take very long, I'd like to tell you about this, this specimen I want to loan you, if you want it."

Something about the man, his old-youthful look and actions, the air of timidity with which he entered the room, aroused in me a curiosity that I do not usually have for the chance visitor.

"Make yourself at home," I said. "Comfortable? All right, shoot!"

He drew a long breath and eyed me steadily. "I don't look crazy, do I?" he asked quietly.

I laughed at that. He looked the part of a timid, hard-working rancher but scarcely that of an insane man.

"Well," he continued, settling back in his chair, "I just wanted to know, because what I have to tell you may sound crazy, but I want to say right now that I am as sane as you are, only it's all so damned weird and foolish that sometimes I wonder if I am crazy or not. Do you know who I am?"

"You have the best of me, friend," I answered. "I don't recall having seen you before."

"Well, I work here in the museum," he said. "My name is John Benson."

I thought rapidly, trying to fit this man with some of the attendants who might possibly work in the annex or the preparator's laboratory, places I rarely visited, but could not remember having seen him, nor hearing his name.

"I'm the night watchman," he added. "I know you by your name on the door. I make the rounds every night but you've never seen me. I've been planning on coming to see you for a month, ever since I got the job, but couldn't bring myself to do it, but things have come to such a pass I just had to get rid of it."

"Get rid of what?" I asked.

He pointed to the bundle on the desk. "That. No, wait, don't open it yet. Wait'll I tell you my little yarn; then you can look at it, and if you want it for the museum I'll loan it to you. I can't give it to you, but you can have it for a long-time loan."

"We have papers for what we call indefinite loans," I said.

"That's it, I'll loan it to you indefinitely; you can keep it as long as I live. Keep it in a glass case where I can see it at night when I make my rounds, and I won't have to think of it being in my room daytimes, while I'm asleep. That's why I want you to have it. I must retain ownership while I'm alive. After I'm dead, well, you can do what you wish with it—keep it, burn it, bury it, anything you like. Now you want the dope?"

HE WAS a most unusual man, and his statements were as unusual as his looks and manners, and his words aroused my curiosity as nothing had done for many a moon.

"Well," he began, "two years ago I shipped out of San Francisco for a job with a mining company in Ecuador. I was just twenty-eight then. I am sixty now! Look at my hair! Look at my face! You thought I was an old man, didn't you? No matter, every one does. That's why I can't get a job as a young man. My looks are against me. That's why I'm a night watchman, working at an old man's job for an old man's pay, by night, and trying to sleep by day. My God! If I don't get some sleep soon I'll be as mad as I sound.

"Well, no matter. Once this is off my chest, I'll sleep soundly.

"The job didn't pan out as well as I expected, and being young and ready for anything I fell like a ripe peach for an old yarn of a lost Inca city lousy with gold somewhere in the Oriente country. I heard it from a young Indian in Quito. He seemed to know what he was talking about. Got me all pepped up with the idea, and offered to guide me in. Said he needed a white man to help him.

"We outfitted and started out. I didn't know a thing about the country, or what we needed, left it all to the Indian. I furnished him with all the money I had, and it seemed to me he got an ungodly amount of stuff for just two of us, and when I mentioned it, he just grinned, and said he knew what we were up against, and would need everything we had before we got back—if we got back. That last crack didn't sound good to me, and I asked him what he meant.

"Then he told me about the Jibaros. To me they might have been a new brand of cigarettes

or something to eat had I heard them mentioned in Frisco, but when that brown-skinned devil calmly informed me that they were some of his uncivilized brothers who made it a national pastime to remove people's heads and convert them into household ornaments, cold shivers rippled up my backbone and I began to wish I was any place but there. However, there was no backing out then. The Indian had hired some carriers from another tribe to cart out stuff over the mountains, and down into the forest land. The whole push decamped the second night after we reached the timber.

" 'Now what?" I asks. 'How we gonna get all this junk into this mess with us and where is that city of gold?' By this time I was beginning to be fed up with cold nights and hot days, strong winds and poor grub.

" 'We wait, bimeby they come, take us in. Pretty soon everything all bueno.'

"That night they did come, twenty or thirty of them, lean, half-naked cusses, all carrying long, chonta palm spears tipped with bone points and decorated with plaited basketry and tufts of bright feathers. Nearly every one had a German-made machete thrust through a woven girdle and five or six of them toted .44 Winchesters.

"They jabbered among themselves, looked at me, grinned, fingered my hair—it was red then—and every minute I expected to see one of their big knives flicker toward my neck or have a spear probing my liver. I didn't like it and told Pepe, my Indian guide, so in danged few words. I was all for going back. He wouldn't hear of it.

" 'We go with them now, see the chief, he expects us,' he said.

"And go we did. At sunset we halted in a clearing where a big house stood, made of posts set on end in the ground and thatched with grass of some sort.

"THEY motioned us to go in, and once inside I took a good look around and nearly fell over, for there sitting on a common kitchen chair sat a huge Negro. He was a good six feet tall and husky as a mule. On his head he had a short, stiff standup headdress of purple and red parrot feathers. On his chest was a breastplate of jaguar skin ornamented all over with red and black seeds, bright feathers, stuffed hummingbird skins and shining green beetle wings.

"On his arms were bands of bark painted red and hung with crimson feather tufts. In his ears were huge golden wheels inlaid with turquoise, the first evidence I had seen of any gold in that neck of the woods. A Winchester

lay across his lap. When he saw me he grinned like a devil.

" 'Git down on yoh knees, stranger,' he rumbled, 'git down on yoh knees and crawl heah and kiss mah feet. Down, yoh heah me?'

"He raised the Winchester and at the same time I felt the point of a spear prod me in the small of the back. Instinctively I glanced over my shoulder and saw Pepe leering at me mockingly.

"WHAT was there to do? A bloodthirsty, traitorous Indian behind me, a mad coon in front of me, ready to blow my guts out. I did what you'd have done, brother: I crawled.

"Well, that was the beginning of six months hell. It seemed the Big Chief had made his way inland and was just a bit mad, by his actions. He had set himself up as sort of a god among those Jibaros. He had welded them into a fighting body and ruled them by magic. He claimed he had conjuring powers, and those babies are as superstitious as they make 'em. He had learned of a hidden Inca treasure and helped himself to it. He hated white men, and had lured several parties into the forest, where he delivered them into the hands of the Jibaro warriors. The heads of those unfortunates hung in a dark, repulsive cluster around the center pole of the Big Chief's house.

"Then he got the Big Idea. He wanted a white slave. He sent Pepe, one of his trusted men, out with the same bait, buried gold. I was the fall guy.

"For six months I was dog-robber to that big burly savage. I had to fan him, I had to wash his feet, I had to fetch and carry for him, and all the time I schemed to escape.

"He was a cunning devil. He seemed to be able to read my thoughts. When I looked longingly at the trail that led into the forest lands toward the west he'd laugh and prod me in the ribs.

" 'Thinkin' uh leavin' me, wus yoh? Jus' try it, stranger! Yuh haid will look purty fine up dar among dose fine gemmemun. Yassuh, soon's yoh daid I'm gonna sew yoh soul inside yoh haid and keep yoh to help me lak I does dem other white folks. Yassuh, dyin' won't let yoh go. I keeps yoh atter you-all am daid. Oooee, I got power, I'se got conjure medicine. I holds onto daid men's souls. Look, stranger, see, dey all got dey lips sewed up. Dey can't escape. Dey helps me.'

"He was mad. No doubt about it. But didn't those Jibaros eat it up! They believed implicitly in what he said, and every head

they took they shrunk to the size of an orange, using hot sand and rocks in the curing process. Then they held a nine-day ceremony, during which time the head-takers danced with those damned grisly things flopping on their chests. At first they just stuck little chonta palm splinters in the lips and later ran long cotton cords through the holes, sewing the lips tightly together.

"I ATTENDED many of those ceremonies during the time I was with them. I had to. In that way I learned just how to do it—how long the fresh skin should be boiled in the preliminary shrinking and how to mold the features as the skin gradually dried, how to sew the cut at the back of the neck where they slit the skin in order to peel the hide from the head, and how to do the delicate skinning work required to remove the skin from around the nose and eyes.

"One day they brought in the head of a kid about fourteen or fifteen, a mestizo, a half-breed.

" 'Now, stranger, I show yoh how I keeps de soul,' leered the Big Chief when the head was properly cured. I done got dis young-un's spirit cooped up, an' to show yoh how easy it is I'se gonna take de splinters outen de lips an' leave 'em out so's yoh can heah it talk to me. Hit's too yong to bodder me. Hit's too scairt o' me to do anythin' but obey. Watch and lissen!'

"I'll never forget that night as long as I live. Big Chief took that gruesome, wizened head and swung it by the head-cord, which was fastened to the top of the scalp, on the center pole. Then he sat down on his chair facing it, and closed his eyes. The hut was full of Jibaros, stinking of sweat, and grease; the fire had some cussed stuff on it that gave off a sickish smell, and a gray silvery smoke that made the air foggy.

" 'Lissen, yoh spirit-boy, lissen an' answer me. I'se tellin' yoh what I wants yoh to do. Tell me, whut does it look lak, dat house way up yander on de mountain, de last one jest before de trail dips down de hills into de trees? Tell me so's I can heah.'

"I leaned forward, watching the head. This was just mummery, I knew, but I had to watch that head.

"I knew the house to which the Big Chief referred. It was the last sign of civilization we had passed, one hundred and fifty miles to the west, a small, stone hut with tiled roof, unlike the wooden thatched dwellings of the Jibaro country.

"THEN my hair began to crawl on the nape of my neck. I felt cold sweat begin to

ooze from my pores. I froze in my tracks.

"That dried head began to speak! From the tiny open mouth issued a thin trembling voice speaking in Spanish.

" 'La casita es de piedra blanca. Hay dos ventanas. Ye veo un hombre en la puerta, es un soldad. . . .

"The head was swaying back and forth, back and forth, and about that time I lost my grip on things and passed out.

"When I came to, the hut was empty of Indians. The head on the post was trembling almost imperceptibly and the Big Chief was looking down at me, a mocking sneer on his ebony face.

" 'Theah, yoh see, I'se voodoo. Now yoh is mah slave foh life—an' in death.'

"That night I sneaked into the hut and ripped the mouth cords out of every white man's head that hung on the central post!

"Mad? Perhaps I was, but I had been shown my way out. The Big Chief feared those spirits. He controlled them only so long as he could keep their souls in their head. The soul must escape through the mouth.

"Then I ran from the hut and hid in the darkness outside. Suddenly I heard a fearful, blood-curdling cry and the sound of a huge body lurching around inside the house. Then a black hulk stumbled through the doorway and loomed for a moment against the stars. I heard hoarse bubbling gasps and an instant later the Big Chief crashed full length in the path, his feet drumming a tattoo on the beaten earth.

"A moment later I heard the sound of laughter, excited laughter and a babble of men's voices dwindling in the distance.

"All the rest of that long night I lay there in the bush scarcely daring to breathe, and not a lance-length from me sprawled the silent corpse of the Big Chief.

"When morning broke I stole over to the body and looked at it. The face was screwed into a terror-stricken mask, the yellow white of the eyeballs stood out hideously, the mouth gaped open and the tongue was thick and swollen, and on the black throat were the thin welts of many fingers, fingers that were bone-like in their thinness.

"IT WAS pleasure to prepare that head. I removed it and stole away into the forest. By that time I was an adept at getting around in the undergrowth. I cured the head as I had seen it done dozens of times, and I was very careful to sew the lips tightly together.

"Then I escaped. I had the golden ear-plugs which the Big Chief had worn in his ears. I had other gold in a leather pouch,

along with extra ammunition for the Big Smoke's .44.

"Finally I won out to the coast and managed to ship home. My hair has been like this since that awful night when the Big Chief passed out.

"Everything was all right. I was home, and if it wasn't for the kinkyhaired doll head I kept on the shelf in my room, which all my friends took for a new kind of Woolworth souvenir, I'd have said it was just a bad dream.

"Then one night I awakened to hear a gasping gurgle close to my ear. It was the mumble of the Big Chief.

" 'Jest a little moah! Jest a little moah! One moah string and I'se free. Then I gits yoh, Mr. Man!"

"I switched on the light and looked at the head. All save one of the cotton cords that held the lips together had parted from dampness and action of a mouse which had gnawed away while I slept.

"It didn't take me long to put new cords in place, I can tell you, but every night now for the last few weeks I have worked here, and I don't have to face the danger of the night, but I can't sleep in the daytime for fear the Big Chief will get loose. So, I want you to take him, put him in a tight glass case where moths or mice can't get at him, and where I can flash my light on him as I make my rounds, and the attendants can watch him during the day. Then I'll sleep. Will you do this for me?"

AS HE ceased, he fumbled with the cord of the parcel and opened the paper.

There lay the shrunken head of a Negro, tiny, repellent.

The tiny eye-slits were closed tightly, the hair curled in a tight kinky mass on the bullet-shaped head, and on the face was a look of horror, perceptible even in the diminutive features which apparently had been carefully molded to represent the living man. Looking closer I saw that the lobe of each ear was slit and distended. The lips were sewed together with new, white cotton cord.

I looked at Benson. He was watching me intently, appealingly.

"Well?"

"Why, of course, we'll be glad to take care of it for you," I said cheerfully, as though I had not listened to as wild a tale as a man ever heard. Privately I thought him the biggest liar I had ever listened to, but he did have a shrunken head and those grisly things do attract the public. "Only," I continued, "I'll have to wait a day or two before I can find a case for it. In the meantime I'll turn it over to the

custodian to place in a fumigating-vat."

"You're sure it'll be safe there? Mice can't get at it? My God, man, can't you realize what it would mean to me if those lips should become unsealed? Suppose I felt those damned black paws at my throat as I traveled down one of the dark corridors. Suppose he got loose and hid out in this building. Can't you imagine the horror of it?"

"Well, mice can't live in fumigating-vats, and besides I imagine he'd feel lost in this building, if he did get loose."

Benson looked at me fearfully.

"You don't know what you're saying. Oh, I know you think I'm crazy as a loon, but for God's sake take care of that head! Now I'm going home and enjoy the first good sleep I've had in weeks."

AFTER he had gone I sat for some time looking at the gruesome, wizened trophy. It was genuine, all right. We have had report that some cunning Chinamen in Panama have been making bootleg heads taken from paupers' bodies, but they sew the neck slit with ordinary cord instead of a bit of fiber from a vine. This head was sewed in the orthodox manner. As for the soul part of it . . . bosh, the man was just a bit daffy. I've had visitors of his caliber before. There was the little old lady who was so gentle and calm but she went off raving in two minutes, telling me about the disembodied spirit who kept invisible watch on her and whispered vile things in her ear as she took the air on top of a Fifth Avenue bus. Benson had been too much alone. He walked at night down the dim corridors alive with the memories of bygone days, and perhaps he had been a prisoner in the Jibaro country, and the sights he had seen were now crystallizing in an all too vivid form.

I turned the head over to the custodian and forgot it for the moment. I really intended to put it on exhibition the same afternoon after it had been in the fumigating-case, but other matters came up and I forgot the cursed thing.

TWO days after this interview Benson came to see me again, and I resigned myself to another long tale of hair-raising horrors, but he surprised me by his brevity.

"You haven't put the head on exhibition yet, I notice," he said, after the first greetings were over. "Would you mind telling me where it is? I—I—don't feel easy unless I can keep it where I can see it."

"By Jove, so I haven't," I said. "The custodian took it to the

fumigation case and I completely forgot it. Glad you reminded me of it. I'll get it immediately."

I went to the phone and rang the front office and asked for the custodian.

"It is his day off, and he won't be in until tomorrow morning," the secretary told me.

"Well, it looks as though we'll have to wait until tomorrow, Benson. Dickson, the custodian, is off for the day, and he has the key to the fumigating-case. I'll make a memorandum and have that head out first thing in the morning."

He appeared somewhat relieved, but a trace of anxiety still lingered in his face.

"It'll be in a case by tomorrow, sure?" he pressed.

"Word of honor," I assured him.

He thanked me and went out.

THE next morning the head was on my mind, and I fully intended asking Dickson to open the case and get the head for me, but an excited group in front of the unfinished gorilla group in the African hall drove the good intention into thin air.

"What's up?" I asked of the electrician who stood on the fringe of the knot of employees.

"Plenty," he answered solemnly. "We got a dead man here and we're waiting for the coroner."

"Dead man!" I echoed. "Who is it?"

"Night watchman, a new man; some one says his name is Benson. Must have had a fit or something. He looks terrible."

I pushed through the group and bent over the body of a man sprawled in a grotesque heap at the feet of one of the huge mounted simians that loomed over the dead body like an ungainly, sinister thing, a setting in that dim, gloomy hall fit to be the climax of a movie thriller.

It was Benson. He had fallen on his back. His flashlight was clutched tightly in his right hand, and the time-clock, glass shattered for all of its protective covering, lay at the feet of the gorilla. I looked at the clock. It had stopped at ten minutes past twelve.

Some one had thrown a piece of canvas over the face of the corpse. I lifted the fabric and stared at the features of the man who had been in my office the day before. In truth he must have died of some sudden seizure. The eyeballs protruded, the tongue showed thick and swollen through blackened lips. I bent closer . . . merciful God, the throat. . . .

I whirled and dashed for the door.

"Dickson! Get Dickson!" I shouted.

He came on the run.

"For heaven's sake, man," he

gasped, "what on earth is the matter with you?"

"The key, man, the key! Open the fumigating-vat immediately!" I said, and I trembled in spite of myself.

"It's empty," he answered. "Oh, by the gosh, I intended telling you something. You know that head—"

"Yes, that's it, the head, what did you do with it? Where is it? Quick, tell me, where is that head?" I seized him by the shoulders and shook him. I felt that I must be going mad.

Dickson gaped at me.

"You crazy?" he asked, wrenching away from me. "Keep your shirt on and I'll tell you. I intended doing it before I left, but it slipped my mind—didn't amount to anything, but I thought I ought to mention it—"

"Out with it! Quick, for the love of heaven, Dickson—where have you put that head? I've got to know," I snapped.

"Well, when you brought it in to me I started to take it downstairs, and by accident the strings dangling from the lips caught on the door and yanked loose. I thought I'd better mend it and took it back to my desk, but some one called me away just then and I forgot all about it. That's all there is to it. The head is on my desk now. Satisfied?"

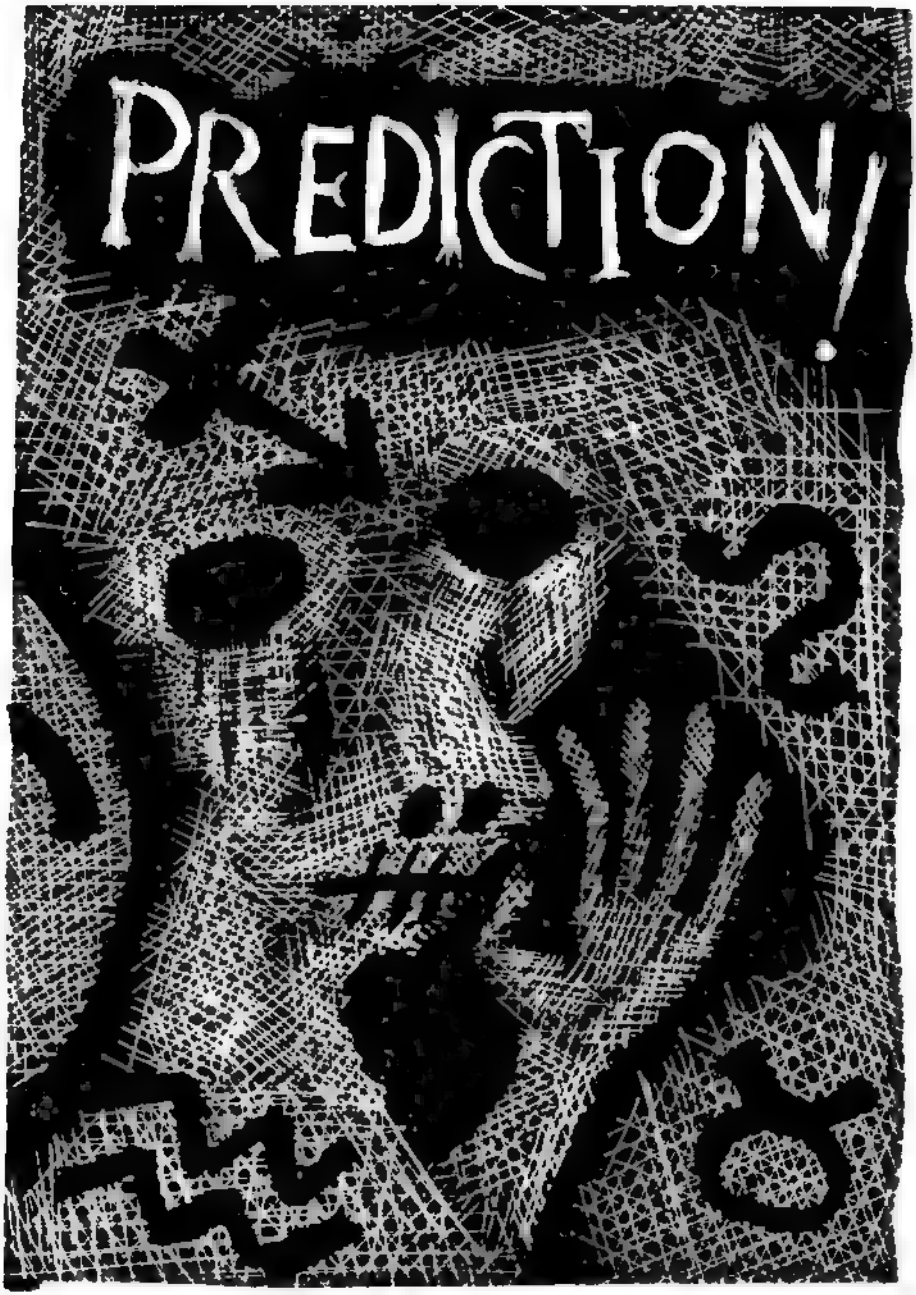
For a moment I thought I was going to keel over. Strings pulled out . . . head on desk. Lips unsealed . . . and there in the gloom of the African hall lay all that was mortal of Benson with a set of cruel, deep welts on his throat. . . .

It was broad daylight but I swear to this day that I heard far off, a throaty, terrible chuckle, receding into the distance, and a voice that chilled me to the very marrow of my bones, jeeringly say:

"Crawl, stranger. Ah holds yoh now foh good! Git down an' crawl!" A mad, terrible voice.

But Dickson couldn't hear it, and now they say I'm a bit cracked because I wired the lips of a shrunken head shut with heavy copper wire, and keep it in a sealed case.

They don't know what Benson and I know.



BY CURTIS W. CASEWIT

"The book of life is a supreme book
which one can neither open nor close.
One would like to return to one's favorite page
But the page where one dies is already under the thumb."

S. Prudhomme.

I

ALL this happened to my friend Herbert Geoffrey Ragsdale after the war when English ladies returned to sniff at the mimosas of Nice and rich gentlemen from Switzerland were again found hanging in the Eucalyptus trees of Monte Carlo after they had gambled away their life savings.

This is not a story of murder although there is a corpse in it, nor of love, despite a blonde American actress, a Spanish count, a *Prefet de Police,* and the idealistic man from Vienna. It is the story of Ragsdale, essentially, Herbert Geoffrey Ragsdale, from whom I had not heard for eight years, when, in his bold handwriting, I received the following letter:

London, July 1946
Dr. François de Beaumonet
Villa Olivette
Cimiez near Nice
France
Dear François: Must leave my empire and dash down to the Riviera for a spot of excitement. I've no doubt you'll provide it.
Cordially,
Rags

I understood at once what he meant by "empire"; he had become a tremendously wealthy man, making money out of automobiles, beer and a new glass-cutter, and later by investing this money wisely. But why did he say "excitement?" I thought the first thing to do would be to give a party for him. I could not predict then that each person I invited should play a rather sordid role, contributing to a chain of unfortunate incidents.

I meant well, for instance, when I called up Max Brody.

He was the man classed as Spanish count, but I knew that he was neither Spanish nor a count. His real name was Brodipoulus, and he did a remarkable business in Swiss francs and American cigarettes. He happened to have the best connections in the black market, and be it for my cuisine or my medical practice, there existed no commodity

Heading by Gahan Wilson

he could not find. Max Brody was a plump man with wavy hair who had a penchant for antic trips and dangerous ventures, although he never did anything more strenuous than placing a daily carnation into his buttonhole.

"Max," I asked, "are you still interested in mountain climbing?"

"Mountain climbing? Of course!"

"Herbert Geoffrey Ragsdale is on his way. You have heard of him, have you not?"

"Yes," said Brody. "Herbert Ragsdale! What a man! He financed the Himalaya trip. When was it? 1939, yes! And then he took part in it!"

"I am giving a soiree for him. What I need are two geese and half a dozen trout."

"Ah."

"Also several pounds of coffee. Two boxes of *chocolats*. And my cellar is empty."

"Am I invited?"

"If you bring these things, yes. You will be reimbursed, as usual."

"C'est parfait," said Max Brody. "I will come."

I CALLED up the *Prefet* of Nice.

His name was Pellin and it had sometimes been useful to know him.

"You have a good memory," I said. "Do you remember a young *Anglais*, ten years ago, who rented a noisy car which he drove through the hyacinths of the Albert Premier gardens? And thereafter to Cannes at top speed?"

"Yes, François. We fined him ten thousand francs."

"Your memory does not fail you. Perhaps you will recall that he has many funds in France. Assets in England. Interests in America. Cartels and so on."

"Should I be impressed?"

"No. Only this time more cautious. He is a friend of mine. I would not like him fined again. Tell your gendarmes. Also, you are invited to a party I will give in his honor."

Pellin accepted. He was a hollow-chested man with a thin mustache who could tell the most unusual things about the political world which would entertain Ragsdale.

We needed a young woman, of course.

I telephoned Angela Sinnt, the American actress. She had a little-girl air and at the same time maturity. I liked her. I liked her for Ragsdale whom I presumed lonely after his second divorce.

"I want you to meet a very handsome man," I said. "I have not seen him for eight years. What I recall are blue eyes, reddish-blond hair and a sharp profile."

"But—"

"A golfer. An excellent tennis player. He also boxes."

"Cheri," she said for she often called me that when she was happy, *"Cheri,* you've convinced me. When is it?"

"Next Saturday. He attends to business in Paris just now. He will arrive by the *train bleu."*

II

SO YOU see how blithely it all started.

I meant well. I could not predict what would happen. I could not know that each person, the olive-skinned Max Brody, the shrewd Pellin and even the gentle Angela Sinnt, would add to Ragsdale's misfortune.

My gravest mistake was to invite Ludwig von Hoffenberg. He lived in a decayed house beyond the port, a house surrounded by shabby cypresses overlooking the cliffs and the sea. Hoffenberg had no telephone. I wrote him a note. I knew he would come.

A day after these contacts were made, I read in the Paris *Herald*:

"Herbert Geoffrey Ragsdale, the Briton who succeeded in turning to gold everything he touched, the man who renovated the French refrigeration industry, the man who designed a new automobile, is finally on his way to the Côte d'Azur for a well-earned rest. He will stay at the Ruhl in Nice."

Ragsdale arrived in the afternoon that July Saturday. The weather was perfect. Nice sparkled. You see, this was another curious thing, this superb July weather at the Riviera, the blueness of the sea, the whiteness of our palaces. This gaiety was to contrast with the horrors that beset us later.

I fetched Ragsdale from the station. He looked as I had described him, only more so: the perfect leader, the sportsman, tanned, muscular, and everything about him spelling success.

We drove down the *Avenue de la Victoire,* and along the sea front to his hotel. A porter unloaded the many suitcases—all initialed H.G.R.—his cameras, golf things and tennis racquets.

By 5 P.M., after a short rest, lunch and shower he was at my house. We made the rounds: I showed him the terrasse where Boris, the butler, was just setting the long table; I showed him the view from the roof-tower where we could see the Mediterranean at the horizon. Then I took him back to the study and let him see my new Picasso. Years ago he had liked paintings. He had changed.

"A painting," he said, "is a distortion of fact."

That was when it all started. Hoffenberg stood behind us. We

heard his shy voice as he remarked, "Sometimes it is better not to see reality."

Ragsdale turned sharply and gave a little laugh. "Not see reality? That's the viewpoint of a coward."

"Or an idealist?" said Hoffenberg, blushing.

"Oh, *pardon,*" I said. "I have not introduced you two."

Hoffenberg bowed. He was an odd-looking man with round shoulders and thick spectacles. His clothes always needed pressing and his hair was too long.

"I'm a realist," remarked Ragsdale. "I believe in coming to grips with the present. Only the present counts."

"How about the future?" asked Pellin. They were all standing behind us now: the thin-lipped frail Pellin, Max Brody with the inevitable carnation in his buttonhole and the lovely Angela Sinnt.

"The future? I'm not afraid of the future. I accept it."

"Then you believe in destiny, Monsieur?" asked Hoffenberg.

Boris arrived with a tray of *aperitifs*. We each took one.

Ragsdale asked, "What do you do, Mr. Hoffenberg?"

"Me? I am a—"

"Do not tell him, Ludwig. He is good at judging people. Let him guess!"

"I won't have to. I'll tell you."

We all waited. Ragsdale looked at Hoffenberg. There was a brief skirmish of eyes between them.

"Your friend is a frustrated writer or a poet or a philosopher."

"Close but not right," I said.

"I am an astrologer," said Hoffenberg.

Just then Boris waved us toward the terrace.

III

THERE were flowers on the table and the silver sparkled. Two champagne buckets were filled with ice. Boris is a fine servant. I seated Ragsdale at the head of the table so that he could see the roofs of Nice beneath him and, by turning, the mountains above. I placed the Astrologer beside him and Angela opposite.

Boris came with the hors-d'oevres and by the time they were eaten and the *roti* on the table, Ragsdale had already quarrelled with most of us; with Pellin about the French wines and Scotland Yard, with Brody about fashion, and with me about medicine. Half an hour later, they were back to astrology.

"Destiny in the stars!" Ragsdale was saying in his clipped English voice. "Fiddlesticks! A man like me makes his *own* destiny!"

There had long been an unease

among these present, an expectancy, a reckless waiting for something to happen, and later, as they were slicing their cheeses and sipping at their wine, an embarrassed silence. Ragsdale had created an antagonism amongst them. He had an arrogant answer for everything Hoffenberg said. Frankly, I did not know how to cope with this. It was a difficult situation, one that shocked and surprised me.

"I'm amazed at the gullibility of man," Ragsdale said. "And you quote people like J. Pierpont Morgan. The Vanderbilts. And all these American film stars!"

"They used astrology, yes." Hoffenberg was very patient; I liked the softness of his voice which contrasted with his appearance.

"And you actually believe you could forecast my future?"

"Indeed. Astrology is a science. A matter of mathematics."

"Good," shouted Ragsdale. "I was born at five minutes after three o'clock on the morning of May 22nd, 1906. Then tell me. *Tell me now! How—am—I—going—to—die?"*

He delivered this question like the slap of a glove. His huge shoulders were hunched forward as if to attack the Astrologer; his face was fiercer than I had ever seen it, the nostrils dilated, eyes under the bushy brows narrowed. Again there was a stoniness on all faces! My guests were holding their breaths, and waiting for Hoffenberg's answer. Even Boris had stopped twirling his bottles in the bucket. I suddenly knew that they were all despising the tycoon and that I had made a great mistake in bringing him.

"Well, Hoffenberg?"

THE Astrologer turned his round head toward me as if seeking advice. I could give none I had never felt as inadequate.

"Listen," Ragsdale told him rudely, "you brought your books and charts, didn't you? Isn't this why you're here?"

"No prediction is absolute—"

"You don't seem to be so sure, now do you?"

"And the prediction of death is least of all absolute. Constellations change. I prefer not to—"

"And if I insist?"

"I would rather you did not—"

"François, what's his fee?"

"Forgive me," I said. "Mr. Hoffenberg does not seem to like—"

"I don't care what he likes," and at this point as if to hide his harshness, Ragsdale smiled showing his teeth. But the damage was done. There was an icy silence and no one, of course, was eating.

"What's your fee, Hoffenberg?"

The Astrologer looked into

his glass. Softly he said: "10 pounds—14,000 francs."

"I'll pay double."

"It is not a question of money."

Ragsdale insisted even more, so that after liqueurs and coffee the Astrologer fetched his paraphernalia and called Ragsdale into the study where he took notes.

BORIS had meanwhile removed the table and we remained in our wicker chairs on the terrace, looking through the arabesques of the railing. I could not find one subject to entertain them with. It seemed like the frustrated silence of strangers in an elevator. There was no doubt that Ragsdale had left a very bad impression. Since the days of Cambridge he had certainly changed. Eight years was a long time. He was very wealthy before the war, and a little pompous, but he had never behaved like this. There was in him a new superciliousness which I could not analyze. Perhaps the money had gone to his head and I knew that I had made a grave error to let him meet Hoffenberg.

After awhile, Ragsdale returned, and when the conversation was slowly resumed, with Brody telling about his luck at roulette, and Angela asking questions and Pellin listening, I drew Ragsdale away from the others. We crossed the study where Hoffenberg was now working, to the other side of the house where a balcony opened to the terraced fields above us. The vines were dusty and a last redness was on the mountain crest.

For a moment we stood quietly, inhaling the balmy air.

Then I said, "Rags, in your letter you spoke of excitement. That was why I invited Hoffenberg."

"Good try, François."

"I am sorry he was uncooperative."

"That's his privilege." Ragsdale nodded toward the study where Hoffenberg hovered over his books. "Twenty pounds changed his mind though!"

I ignored the remark. "It is a woman I invited you for."

"I'm through with women."

"Have a look at her—" I made him turn his head so that he could see Angela on the terrace. She was smiling, and looked graceful in her white linen dress.

"Angela just finished a picture."

"What part did she play? A vamp?"

"A nurse—" Ragsdale went on smoking, resentfully. I suddenly recalled his reaction when I had introduced them several hours ago; she had been in Europe so long that she had risen

and stretched her hand out. He had taken it, tense, his teeth clamped together.

"She is no *femme fatale,*" I said. "Nor quite like other actresses. She is lonely."

He did not answer, looking at the mountain where the lights went on. I continued to cater to him for I knew not what reason. Perhaps I was trying to revive my old camaraderie with him; perhaps it was on account of Angela whom I liked. Presently she turned her head with languor. She did everything with languor. Brody was flirting with her.

After awhile, Ragsdale said, "François, you'll never understand this, being French. But I can get along *without* women."

"Can you? I must contradict you at that point."

"I'll let you. But once *my* mind is—"

"Rags, tell me—what has changed you so?"

"Some other time! Let's get back to the others, shall we?"

IV

HOFFENBERG had joined the group on the terrace. He had his threadbare briefcase on his knees. He rose when he saw us appear through the French doors. There hung again a silence in the air, until Ragsdale broke it. "I say! I want everybody to stay here. I want everyone to witness this twenty-pound horoscope!"

The Prefet got up. "I enjoyed the dinner, François." And before I had time to stop him, he left.

Max Brody stayed a little longer. Then he shook my hand, ignored Ragsdale and asked Angela whether he could drive her to Nice. "Thank you very much, but no," said Angela, and Brody left with a *"Bonne nuit!"*

"Well," asked Ragsdale, unruffled. "Are you ready, Hoffenberg?"

"I am not, Monsieur. I will need another day."

I suggested that they meet on my beach strip in Cannes two days later. Then I accompanied the Astrologer down the stairs, to await Boris with the car. We stood in the darkness under the umbrella pines. Stars were over us.

"How long is your friend to stay?" asked Hoffenberg.

"Six weeks, perhaps eight. He came for a *repos.*"

"He must not remain here. He should leave."

"Leave? Why?"

"You see, François, his horoscope is very bad. Tragedy. A terrible tragedy. If he leaves, it may not happen."

I said nothing. I heard Boris open the garage door, switch on the light and back the car out over the gravel.

"There is an advantage in astrology. One can warn a man so that he can master fate."

"Then warn him!"

"He will not heed my words," said Hoffenberg. "Help me. Send him away."

"It is impossible," I said. "I cannot do anything. The appointment, Ludwig. It has been made—"

"Please! Please! Tell Ragsdale I cannot cast his horoscope!" There was an urgency in the Astrologer's voice, and I saw his face in the darkness; the lines that creased his forehead. But then Boris arrived with the car.

"You have promised," I said. "With him you cannot break a promise."

Hoffenberg shook his head and then climbed into the car. They drove out of the gate and I stood under the trees for awhile, staring down at the lights of Nice which shone like pearls.

When I returned to the study, Ragsdale was leaving. He seemed surly till the last moment. He had his rented car downstairs but did not bother to offer Angela a lift.

V

AT LAST I was alone with her. I promised myself not to mention Ragsdale.

"Angéle," I said, "the evening was bad. I am sorry."

She did not answer immediately. I watched her hands; they were round and very soft. She wore no jewelery. Just the round soft hands.

After awhile she asked, "Do you know Ragsdale well?" Her face was serene, open.

"Once I did. Why?"

"Once?"

"Yes. He is not the same man."

A late ship gave a melancholy sound. It was the night steamer to Corsica.

"He is suffering," said Angela. "I would like to help him."

She leaned forward and I saw as in a close-up the fine lines in her face—lines, no doubt, of disappoinments and the wear of life.

"François," she said, in a whisper almost. "Ragsdale interests me. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Angéle."

I contemplated the twisted path of the human heart. Here was a man who did not wish her, who was hard and reluctant; who bore her a passionate grudge for what women had done to him. And there she was drawn to him, for just these reasons.

"I'm very busy," she said. "I'm studying several scripts. Hollywood wants me back. So I don't know how long I'll stay here, but—"

"I will do my best," I said.

VI

TWO days later I picked up Hoffenberg. I had never been to his house, if such it can be called. One of the windows is stuffed with paper, and the brick walls sag as if they cannot support the roof. And his two rooms —I then saw them only for an instant, for Hoffenberg was ready—looked like antique shops. I had never seen such dirt and disorder, and such accumulations of worthless objects.

We drove to Cannes and found Ragsdale on the beach. He was in his bathing trunks, sprawled in a deck chair, *Leica* beside him. His massive body was drenched with oil and his face glistened in the sun.

"You brought the scientist," he jeered. And to Hoffenberg: "There's a chair. Sit down! I hope you made up a good story!"

I wanted to leave but he forced me to stay.

Hoffenberg opened his briefcase and withdrew a number of neatly written sheets and a chart, covered with black ant-like signs.

"Mr. Ragsdale," he asked. "Are you absolutely certain you want this? I mean *absolutely* certain?"

"Of course I want it. Never mind the preambles!"

"I dislike this responsibility. I can still return your check—"

"I daresay not!"

"You have an excellent brain," Hoffenberg began. "A brain that grasps. It gave you financial success."

"You've read the papers!"

"I do not read papers, Mr. Ragsdale. Not anymore. I judge from stellar conditions."

Hoffenberg looked up, awkwardly, as if requesting permission to continue.

"Go on!"

"You despise weakness. You are frequently angry. You are too sensitive—and much too impulsive. Too much energy, intensity, passion. That is why—"

"I know what I am. I'm not interested in a character analysis."

"That was the reason you divorced, I wanted to say. You had two divorces. You suffered the loss of many women—"

"Suffered? Ha. Why don't you talk about the future?"

"I will." Hoffenberg turned the pages of his script. He was a curious mixture of crankiness and kindness. "I predict that you will fall in love—"

"Me? In love? You heard that, François? I hate women. I despise the entire calculating scheming lot of them!"

"Love and hate sometimes go hand in hand."

"An old thought, dear fellow."

"You will reach this woman. You will have her. And *lose* her."

"If I can't fall in love—and I can't!—it's impossible to lose a woman. You're not very logical."

"Life is not very logical." Hoffenberg pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his heavy spectacles. He did this very methodically. Around us bathers ran, chasing one another, and children skipped over the sand. The Mediterranean was bluer than I had ever seen it, and the air smelled of salt.

"Why don't you make this short, my friend. *How shall I die?*"

The Astrologer hesitated, pulling the spectacles over the bridge of his nose. Then slowly, "Remember, Mr. Ragsdale, *you* wanted me to say this."

"Yes, *I*. I'm not afraid."

"You will die—in the arms of a woman."

I WATCHED Ragsdale, saw his eyes become smaller, his broad dominant face turn into creases, and then the first peal of laughter, followed by another, until, hands over his stomach, he laughed so hard that his entire body rocked.

"Give me a towel, François," he shouted and as I handed it to him, he wiped his perspiring chest and face. "Arms of—a—woman, eh? But that's pleasant, man! Darn pleasant—" He turned to me still shaking with laughter. "François, wouldn't that be good? Jolly, jolly good! Tell me, you ought to know!"

"You're mistaken," said the Astrologer. "It will be an unpleasant death—"

"Unpleasant, eh? I'll tell you again, *Herr Professor,* I hate women. I loathe them! I wouldn't be seen near a woman. And therefore I won't die in the arms of one."

"Nevertheless it will be so."

"I must give you credit. You're not only fantastic but also original!"

"The dying will be slow. It will take several days. And no one will help you. You will be surrounded by people and they will let you die."

"Ridiculous," shouted Ragsdale. "Help? And *I* can't get it? You're insane, man. The pound still has *some* value!"

Hoffenberg rose and handed the dossier and his card to Ragsdale. "You understand that constellations change. Please come back and see me again. Nothing is final."

After he had gone—he caught the bus back to Nice—Ragsdale asked me why Hoffenberg limped.

I had never told him about it. "Torture," I said.

"Torture? How?"

"He made a prophecy to an evil man in his country. An evil prophecy—"

"Death in a woman's arms?"

"No. A violent death. Asphyxiation."

"And it happened?"

"Yes. The man died in an underground bunker just off the Wilhelmstrasse. The bunker was hit by a bomb. But before this happened, the man had put Hoffenberg in irons, telling him to take back the prediction. Hoffenberg refused. So they smashed his knee bone with a hammer, blow by blow. That was when Hoffenberg left Hitler's General Staff."

"General Staff?"

"Yes," I said, watching a speedboat at the horizon. "You see, Rags, at the time of the dictator's march into Vienna, Hoffenberg lived there. He was, as I told you, famous."

Ragsdale opened his mouth to answer and then closed it again. He was impressed. I told him how the new masters forced Hoffenberg to work for them, how he became one of the top five astrologers who guided every action of the *Fuehrer,* until he made the prediction to his aide.

VII

I HAD no important appointments so that I spent the day at the beach. Ragsdale was a magnificent swimmer. I could not help thinking of Angela. I had not forgotten her request; but I did not mention it to Ragsdale. I would not admit to myself that Hoffenberg's prediction held me back. Frankly, whatever Hoffenberg's past and his celebrated record, I did not believe in revelations of this genre. I occasionally had Hoffenberg at the house as one would invite a violin player or a Hula dancer—merely as a new type of amusement for my friends. Some of them followed Hoffenberg's advice, even to the extent of delaying business transactions or the purchase of a villa. But nothing like this had ever happened before. Hoffenberg had never made a fatal prediction; and not once did I have an occasion to doubt his ethics. In fact, I liked him. I sympathized with this round-shouldered limping Austrian who had never done any harm.

But I kept quiet about Angela.

She phoned me the same evening. I was smiling about the amount of diplomacy she employed to make me keep my promise. In what delicate words she tempted me! She used her most languid voice. I could imagine her in a telephone booth, just back from a game of tennis, the blond head pressed to the phone, her lips parted, her delicate skin flushed, and her feet in sandals, placed sideways on the floor. Ah, *l'amour!* I promised again.

Next day I had lunch with Ragsdale at the Ruhl.

It was difficult for me to understand what Angela saw in him.

He was very handsome, of course, with two sharp lines leading down from under his eyes—blue eyes—to the chin. It was an unusual face, perhaps, because it showed a combination of energy and sensitivity. But as a person he had changed completely. Everyone disliked him. Pellin had phoned, inquired about the outcome of the horoscope, and, as I remained silent, voiced his antipathy. Brody had not phoned—he seldom did—but I knew that he too, felt a distaste for Ragsdale. Only Angela wanted to know him better. While we had our coffee I thought again of her request. There was no opportunity to speak of it.

Afterwards we walked along the Promenade which was sun-baked and overcrowded as always at this noon-hour. In the *Jardins* we sat down on one of the iron-wrought benches. These gardens are filled with people every summer: little nurses in uniforms with their young flock, my compatriotes from Paris, Calais and Grenoble who come for their vacations, and then of course, the usual habitués, old ladies mostly, who also graced my medical practice, absorbing quantities of capsules into which we put nothing more than water, to cure their imaginary ills.

WE WERE looking at all these people, and gamblers, the international riff-raff, the matadors from Barcelona, German tourists and the many white Russians. There was this mixture of haste and leisure which one finds at the Riviera.

After awhile, Ragsdale said casually, "I say. What became of this—blonde creature? The Ingrid Bergman from the party, I mean."

"Angela?"

He nodded.

"Why do you ask?"

"I would like to see her."

Just then someone sat down beside us and we got up and walked on, out of the gardens and toward the ocean.

"I thought you hated women?"

"I do. I do."

I looked at the beach and saw hand-waving *Nicois* and bathers in crazy bathing costumes, and a steamer at the horizon. The sky was splashed with blue. I did not look at Ragsdale.

"What're you avoiding me for? You don't think I mind what this—charlatan said!"

"He's not a charlatan."

"All right, chappie. Then he's not." And softly, "Still, François, I would like to see her."

I was afraid. I did not believe Hoffenberg's predictions, not

really, even if this first one had come true. I thought it a coincidence. Still, I was afraid. But one could not change Ragsdale's mind, once it was made up. He was the most obstinate man I had ever met.

So I said, "You are lucky. Angela likes you." And gave him her address.

VIII

WHAT happened after that seemed rather curious. He did not come to the villa. One day in August I received a note in his large script:

"Dear François:

We're taking long walks, spend many hours together. We saw Beaulieu; we drove up to Grasse, and visited the Perfume establishments. We're playing tennis and golf. We swim and participate in the many fêtes and soirées the Riviera offers.

Cordially,

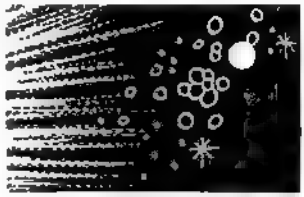
Rags."

Not a word of thanks, of course. Ragsdale was not a man leaning to gratefulness.

I could have phoned him at the *Ruhl* but I did not wish to interfere in his life. Besides, I was busy with my English ladies. As for Angela, I did not hear from her. I was glad about their idyll *á deux*.

Driving down the Rue Lamartine one September afternoon I saw them both; they made a handsome couple which invariably stood out from the crowds. They were at a little kiosk which dispenses *jus de raisin*—freshly pressed grapes—he in a polo shirt and she in slacks with a ribbon through her hair. They did not see me as they toasted to each other, Angela with her arm through Ragsdale's. Perhaps I am a sentimental man because I imagined him talking now, propounding his difficulties and Angela absorbing them. There was a chance for him, perhaps, to adapt himself.

I considered the matter as closed. Once he phoned, another time she wrote, and by fractions I learned that they had become important to each other. She sent him little gifts: an invitation to



the opera one month, a new tennis racquet the next, and he despatched, morning for morning, two dozen freshly-cut roses and every Sunday a box of candied marrons or Sicilian peaches. He never did anything in halves. Chivalry or rudeness; love or hate. I felt victorious. And I had forgotten Hoffenberg.

IX

THEN, one day in October, Ragsdale came up to my house. I had just returned from the clinic and sat on the terrace, eating figs from a basket. He fell heavily into a wicker chair. He had had too much sunshine, and his face was peeling. I pushed the basket toward him but he shook his head.

"I want you to do something for me."

"Yes," I said. "What?"

"Contact Angela."

"Oh?"

"Something has gone wrong. I can feel it."

Below us, a little donkey was pulling a big cart, loaded with olives. A man was hitting the donkey.

"How can you feel it?"

"Little things, François." He lit a cigarette and waved the match out with quick movements.

"What things?"

"Like her lack of time, for example. She says she has no time. You know how little she speaks. It's hard to understand. I don't know what happened."

"The predictions—did you ever mention them to her?"

"No. No. Of course not."

"Do you believe in them?"

"I don't. I absolutely don't! You should forget about this mumbo-jumbo!"

I remained quiet which forced him to speak. "Forget about the predictions!" And then louder, "She doesn't want me. Say the truth!"

"How can I know, Rags?"

"You're a doctor. You're supposed to understand human nature." Softly, "And you're my only friend. Please get in touch with her."

"Surely you can arrange these things yourself. You have known her for a long time."

"Now, please! Get in touch with her!"

It was strange how he said this—with humility almost. Something was happening to Ragsdale. As he followed me inside I noticed that he had lost his erect gait; he seemed bent.

I poured him a glass of *Pernod* and helped myself to one. Then I went to the phone. "Rags, may I ask you something?"

He was very tense; his cheekbones stirred. "Do," he said. "Ask! I'm at your mercy!"

"I mentioned this before, Rags. On the rear balcony. It is this, what has changed you so? I mean, since Cambridge?"

He was leaning against the wall, the Picasso at his left; a palm pot in a metal frame to his right.

"Last year—when I came back from the Himalaya expedition. I met a woman. In Torquay. You know where it is. South Coast of England. I—loved her."

He reached into the palm pot and tore a fragment off the plant.

"Yes, Rags."

"Oh, rot. Why don't you phone first? Angela should be in."

"Later. You tell me about the woman in Torquay."

"I wanted to marry her. My third marriage. But one evening I found her with another man."

"That can happen."

"But never like this!" He tore another bit off the plant and squeezed it between his fingers until the juice ran out of it. "Women are hypocrites. They're insensitive. One day she became aloof, you see. I knew something was wrong. She always went out nights. Had no more time. Going to the library, she said. One evening I followed her. Not a detective, François. But *me!*

"She didn't go to the library. She went down to the beach. I watched her. She was there with the other man."

"I am sorry," I said, understanding him much better. He had thawed; suddenly he became human.

"I will call Angela now," I said.

Ragsdale stayed next to me, his eyes glued to the receiver as I picked it up.

"Rags," I said. "A little favor. Go on the terrace while I speak to her. Yes?"

X

WHEN he had gone, I dialed Angela's hotel. She was in.

"Comment çâva?" I asked.

"I am well, *cheri.*"

"He is here. Ten meters from me. And with problems."

"Problems?" She was always the same: self-possessed and confident. And a little vague.

"He would like to see you."

"I've much work," she said. "I told you. I'm studying a script. Might have to leave any day. I—"

"Tell me, Angéle. Did Rags ever speak about the horoscope?"

"No. Why?"

"It does not matter. What happened to you two?"

There was a pause. I felt childish. One could go too far in trying to bring people together, especially when they were as complicated as Ragsdale.

Then she said softly, "He has changed."

"How?"

"I can't put my finger on the spot. It's hard to explain, François."

"Try!"

"It's a fear," she said. "As if —well, as if he were afraid to lose me."

"Does he have reasons to fear this?"

"Perhaps."

"Why, Angela?"

"I liked the boldness in him.

This was his major quality, François. Boldness. Strength. A daredevilish streak. He's lost it—"

"Angéle," I pleaded, "could you not see him once more?"

I spoke to her for awhile, watching Ragsdale on the terrace, his massive hands on the railing, the back turned to me, and then again, as he strode back and forth, impatiently.

Angela finally agreed to meet him the next evening. I gave him the news. He seemed relieved. Thereafter we spoke of this and that, and then he mentioned the fact that he needed soap and cigarettes. I promised to contact my only source for these things: the man named Max Brody.

XI

THE next evening, while Ragsdale went to see Angela, I drove to Brody's house. It was at the sea front, a white stucco affair, very small, really, but surrounded by an enormous wall. Light beams were on the house when I arrived, a measure—as he explained it once—against burglars. He wore no carnation because he was in a house coat.

"How does your friend get along with Angela?" he asked.

"Why does it interest you?"

"Why? I wanted her. Ragsdale stole her."

"My regrets," I said. "There are other women. The Côte d'Azur abounds with beauty."

"The demoiselle appealed to me," said Brody. "I like Californian apples better than those from Nice. And what gives me the honor to see you?"

"American cigarettes. A quantity."

"For whom?"

"For me."

He went down into the cellar where he kept all his things and returned with a shoe box, and a string round it. He always delivered black market merchandise in a shoe box.

When I paid him he asked, "What happened to Ragsdale's horoscope?"

"Nothing special," I said. *"Au revoir!"*

Two days later, on my way back from the clinic I parked my automobile near the Ruhl and carried the shoe box up to Ragsdale's room.

His expensive luggage stood in an even row against the wall. Copies of the *London Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* were in the waste basket. He did not greet me, but went on filling a last suitcase. He was in shirtsleeves, and looked tired.

"So we're going to lose you," I said.

"There won't be much lost."

"Quite the reverse. And what happened?"

"What *happened,* François? And *you* ask me?"

"I am not Nostradamus."

He dropped a pair of trousers into the case, snapped the lock and stared at me. His hauteur, his arrogance, all gone.

"Sit down," he said. "I'll tell you."

I sat down.

"She has cheated me. You understand that? Cheated me!" His eyes widened. His flat hand knocked on the table. Veins stood out from the hand. He was still impulsive.

"So tell me," I said.

"It was very simple. Very simple. I went down to her hotel around nine. Just as you arranged it. They're serving cocktails outside. You remember she promised to meet me there. I was early."

"All right. And then?"

"I didn't go inside. I got up after awhile and went to the beach."

"Yes," I said, with a premonition.

"They've an old bathing cabin there. I walked toward it. Over the pebbles. Silently. Not a detective. But *me!*"—

"*And there she was!* I saw her profile in the moonlight! Like I see you now. And against the wall with her: a man. Close. Close, I tell you!" He sat down on the window sill, breathless.

"Rags. Do not speak more."

It was a monstrosity. I thought of Angela, the frankness in her face, the finesse of her person. I believed Ragsdale; I was sorry for him, and then, momentarily, I wondered whether it could be his imagination. She was to meet *him.* It was impossible. But at the Riviera nothing was quite impossible.

Ragsdale got up, pacing the room. He told me how, through the impact of the moment, he just stood there, in the night and said nothing and thought nothing, and how, afterwards, he walked away, weakness in his knees. He did not inquire at her hotel. An hour later, in his room, rage came over him and he tore up all the pictures she had given him. He showed me the shreds in the waste basket.

"But, Rags," I said, "this is not the end of everything. You can ski in Chamonix. Why not go there for awhile—no?"

"No," he said.

"Or the Carneval of Nice, soon. Or—"

"I'm leaving," he cried. "For good."

He went on packing I looked out of the window. The sky was clear and blinking with stars.

"The prediction," I said—and I don't know why I said it for it immediately infuriated him. "Do you believe in it?"

"No," he shouted. "How often should I tell you? Though

I've a surprise for you! I'm on my way to Hoffenberg."

"A good idea," I said. "He advised you to come."

He opened a drawer and pulled out the horoscope in the astrologer's dossier. He threw the dossier into the waste basket. There were little lights dancing in Ragsdale's eyes now, as he advanced toward me. "And I've another surprise for you. The reason I'll see Hoffenberg is *not this!"* and he pointed to Hoffenberg's sheets. "It's something quite different!"

"What?"

"The man I saw with Angela looked like a frog. Just like your astrologer!"

"You are absurd, Rags. You are not in your right mind—"

"Hang it all, man! Keep your opinions to yourself!"

"Let me drive you."

He pushed me out of the room. "Thanks. My plane leaves at ten. See you tomorrow morning. And I'm going to Hoffenberg *now."*

With that he slammed the door in my face.

XII

I WENT to the desk phone and dialed Angela's hotel. *Perhaps she can explain,* I thought. The hotel told me that she had checked out. Checked out three days ago! So she had not even been in Nice that evening, unless she moved. If she had left she had no doubt tried to reach me before. I had not been home since morning. Perhaps there was a letter from her. I called the house. Boris answered.

"Boris," I said excitedly. "Please look through today's mail."

He did and quoted the names of the senders. There was a letter from Angela Sinnt. "Open it," I said.

He hesitated.

"Open it, Boris. And quickly!"

He read in his broken English:

"Cheri:

A telegram came from my agent. Must leave in two hours. Tomorrow I should've seen your friend Ragsdale. I'm sorry I can't. I've tried to reach him; he was out. So I wrote him a note. It left with the same mail as this. Thanks for everything.

Amour. Angéle."

I put the phone down incredulously. So at the beach it had not been Angela, nor her ghost, but simply another woman. And Ragsdale, hypersensitive as he was, had seen things. His mind had, so to speak, repeated an event.

Just then Ragsdale stepped out of the elevator. His cuffs were not buttoned and a tie hung out of his white suit.

"Wait!" I called as he rushed past me.

He turned and I went toward him. "It's all been a mistake, Rags. A terrible mistake. Angela has left. She is on her way to America. The evening you had to meet her she was—"

"Prove it!"

"Ah, I will. I will! She wrote you a note. It must be here."

We went to the desk.

"My mail. Herbert Geoffrey Ragsdale."

The clerk nodded and put his hand into Ragsdale's box.

It was empty.

"It is the mail," I said. "The mail in Nice is sometimes slow—"

Ragsdale's eyes narrowed. Of course he did not believe me. I wanted to tell him about Angela's message but he ran away, pushing through the revolving doors out into the *Promenade*.

I stared after him. He could not find a cab and jumped into a trolley. He had Hoffenberg's card. I wondered what I should do, and decided to drive to the astrologer's house. I had to warn him. I had to prevent a mishap. And perhaps he could revise the horoscope.

XIII

I PASSED the trolley and caught a glimpse of Rags as he stood in a cluster of people, tourists and women and black-haired children. I imagined the stench and oily odors. I knew I would get to Hoffenberg's house before Ragsdale could.

He had to cross the Paillon river and the *Vielle Ville* where there were no more palms and marble palaces. He had two kilometers through crooked lanes of the old town where prostitutes stood at the corners and where squat women with aprons argued from window to window, across clothes-lines. And then down through the tin-can-littered streets to Hoffenberg's miserable abode above the sea.

XIV

I REACHED Hoffenberg's house from the *Corniche* Road.

After parking my car, I walked along a stone wall. Below me were rocks, and tiny roads twisting themselves to the sea. As I approached I could observe the astrologer through a curtainless window. He sat at a dusty desk; with books heaped up around him and on tables and chairs. Shreds of tapestry hung from the walls, and faded dust-covered etchings and paintings.

I knocked.

"Come in," he called and when I entered, he rose slowly, painfully.

"Ludwig," I said, "Ragsdale

is on his way here. He is in a bad state. You must hide."

"There is no reason for it."

"As you wish, Ludwig. But do me one favor."

"Yes, François."

"He does not believe your horoscope. At least he says so. But just in any case, Ludwig. Tell him the forecast is not correct. Say to him that nothing will ever happen."

Hoffenberg looked at me quietly from behind his thick lenses.

"It is important," I went on. "You understand that. Two predictions already came true. But you must tell him he is safe."

"I can examine his horoscope again."

"No. No. Do not examine anything! Just tell him that—"

"Do you wish me to lie then?"

I shuddered. "Lie? Do you mean it will happen? The woman, the—"

He sat down, not answering. Somewhere a water tap dripped. Rhythmically.

"Ludwig! You must help me, you hear? The man will kill someone. Or kill himself. Find a way—"

Again he did not answer.

"Think! We only have ten minutes."

We had ten seconds.

Steps crunched on the road above. They were coming down.

Ragsdale jerked the door open. He looked at the disorder, the dirt, and then advanced toward the wall, not noticing Hoffenberg who turned livid, nor me, but staring at the wall.

"Angela," he cried. "There. There! I knew!"

I tried to follow his panicky widening gaze, past Hoffenberg now, past a floor-lamp, past a ridiculous-looking cat which I had not seen before. It all happened so quickly; he scrambled toward the wall, toward a painting which he now covered so that I could not see it, and then I heard a savage blow, another "Angela, Angela!" uttered in Ragsdale's hoarse voice, and then the sound of glass, smashing onto the floor. A cloud of dust rose. Ragsdale himself stood against the wall, facing me, in a pose of hostility. His suit was soiled and splinters glittered in his bleeding knuckles.

I went toward him. He seemed nailed to the spot, gasping and staring at me. Sweat covered his face and his hair stood up, virtually.

"I hate her," he cried. "I loathe her."

HOFFENBERG moved toward him, from behind the table.

"And her picture! *Hers.* How did it get here?" He stared at the astrologer, all the frustration,

all the accumulated terror of the past years boiling within him.

He clutched my arm just as I wanted to examine the painting.

"It is a *Degas,*" said Hoffenberg. "The dancer—"

"So you see it is not Angela! It was all a mistake—" Passion, I thought. He sees you everywhere, Angela. "Let me show you," I added.

But he held on to my arm, vise-like.

"Ludwig," I said, "do pick up the painting."

Hoffenberg did not move. It was curious how he stood in the center of the room now, small, puffy-cheeked, gazing into his cigarette-filled ashtray. And as for Ragsdale, he seemed as if in a trance, a sudden softness in his blood-streaked eyes, a softness because with one hysterical blow against the inanimate thing—the painting of a woman—he had released his hatred.

But then he walked past me out of the house.

"—wait a moment! My car—"

But he was already out of sight. I heard the clatter of his footsteps rushing into the darkness.

I wanted to run after him. But I am not a young man.

"Ragsdale," I shouted. There was no answer, except from the waves.

"Hoffenberg," I said, "we must find him. His injury—it is grave. You saw his hand?"

The astrologer nodded, but only turned to the painting, picking it up from the floor. Its frame was broken, its glass shattered, with Ragsdale's blood on it. It was Degas' Star, yes, the lovely dancer, her hair crowned by a ribbon, with the sea in the background.

"Ludwig," I said, "you must come with me. Let us look for him. As a doctor, I—"

"It is too dark. The cliffs are dangerous."

"Then what can we do?" I was slowly losing my senses.

"Inform the police. Ask them to search with lights—"

I asked Hoffenberg to let me have the painting so that I could show it to Rags when he returned to the hotel.

WHEN I arrived at the *Préfecture* that night, I found my friend Pellin on duty. A cigarette was jutting from the corner of his mouth. "Ah, François, how content I am to see you! I have bought a little yacht. You are invited to a party I will give on it this weekend—"

I interrupted him and explained Ragsdale's situation, and asked Pellin to send a squad at once. All the beaches should be searched, as well as the shopping districts and the old town. Pellin

listened with interest, impartially like a policeman.

"I comprehend," he said, touching his thin mustache with the tip of his finger. "I will take care of it. But just tonight, François, we are expecting a political demonstration."

"But this is a matter of life and death!"

He raised a thin hand. "I will handle it, François! But not tonight. Tomorrow—"

My throat was constricted as I walked out of Pellin's office. You see, the *Prefet* had done many things for me; I could not understand that he would fail me now.

XV

IT WAS midnight when I reached my house in Cimiez and two in the morning when I returned to Ragsdale's hotel with Angela's letter and the *Degas* which I had made into a bundle. Ragsdale had not come in; so I went to his room and left the bundle, some gauze, disinfectants and a note that he should tentatively attend to his wound when he came in. I also left a message at the desk to inform me as soon as Ragsdale should return.

I spent a sleepless night and a day and another night, shuttling between Hoffenberg's house, the *Prefecture* and the *Ruhl*. The next day I was called out to Villefranche, which is only six kilometers from Nice. A woman was very ill; I gave her a prescription when a message came from the clinic. Ragsdale's hotel had phoned them; he was in his room.

I left Villefranche as quickly as I could. The curves on the road to Nice are very sharp. And the road is lonely. My car broke down where it is loneliest.

By the time I was in Ragsdale's room, I knew that he was in a very bad way. I also knew that Pellin had never sent his men out, although I could never prove it.

Ragsdale lay on his bed, shaking with fever. Everything, the swollen arm, with the thin red line stretching up from the wrist, the hollowed cheeks, the jaundiced skin, and his breathing—the shallow hurried breathing—everything pointed to blood-poisoning. He was beyond transfer to the clinic, but not beyond hope. But what I needed was penicillin.

The drug was only available in the black market. I knew only one man who had it. It was Max Brody. Everything depended on him.

I phoned his house. He was out. I left the *Ruhl* number.

Then I asked the hotel kitchen to send up some boiled water, and when it was brought, I attended to Ragsdale's injury the

best I could. He was wet with perspiration and his clothes were torn, his white suit black. Somehow his body seemed to have shriveled.

I waited for Brody's call, pacing back and forth, with Ragsdale slowly dying and the sky outside bluer than ever and the wide sweep of the Bay gay with boats and sails.

Finally I reached Brody. He had just come in.

"Max," I said with emotion. "I need penicillin. I will pay any price."

"What happened?"

"I—"

"What happened?"

"Ragsdale—it's his only chance."

"François! How I wish I could help you. But I have none of that drug." The receiver clicked. Brody had hung up.

When Rags came out of his delirium, I rushed toward his bed.

"I will do everything I can," I said although I knew that nothing could be done. "But the painting—it was not Angela! And I have her letter to me."

He watched me out of sunken eyes; his lips were parched. He moaned, "Show me—"

I opened the bundle and cleaned the painting. It was faded, this Degas copy, yes, and as I wiped the dry blood away, I all at once saw something I had not noticed before because that night at Hoffenberg's I had been much too frantic.

I saw that the woman in the picture had her arms stretched out!

The prediction! A shiver went down my back.

"Show me," he moaned.

I gave him the letter.

"No, the picture—"

"You are tired now, Rags. I—"

With a last effort: "The picture—!"

I gave it to him. He stared at it, unseeing, I hope, and then fell back against the cushion, and the frame fell over him.

Later I shakily left the room and passed the desk.

"Monsieur," said the clerk, "we have some mail for Herbert Ragsdale."

I turned Angela's letter over in my hand. I sent it back to her later, without opening it, and I never saw her again, nor did I dare to write her. You see, I did not wish to destroy one last hope; that in this one instance Hoffenberg was wrong and that she, perhaps, this lovely American woman, had spoken of love.

THE PLACE IN THE WOODS

BY AUGUST DERLETH

THOSE of you who live in cities have little conception of isolated country places, where one is alone with sky and trees, with the soil and the waters of the earth, with the invisible dwellers of the woods. There must be many hidden places on the face of the earth like the place in the woods on my grand-

. . . fantastic places still on the face of the earth where the old gods die hard.

father's farm, places with trees and a pool in a brook, where the earth has never been turned and nothing has ever disturbed the haunts which were occupied by unknown dwellers ages before any human being walked there.

Grandfather never forbade us to go to the place in the woods. Indeed, we went everywhere—my sister, my cousin, and I—but there was no other spot on the farm we liked so well as the place where the brook made a pool under the great old trees, the beech and the oak, the scarlet maple and the birch, all unaware that it was a place set apart.

It was an idyllic woodland setting. The great trees were three and four feet in diameter; their limbs hung low, pressing groundward; and they were thick there, making a kind of haven of the place, a haven in which the voice of the brook was constant, and, in summer, the hushing of the birch and beech leaves, whether wind blew or not; though otherwise it was still, with a few bird voices raised there, drifting in from outside, as if this little place were reserved for us.

It lay perhaps a mile from the farm buildings, for my grandfather's was a large farm of almost three hundred acres, and the woods alone was close to a hundred acres in low rolling land and small hills, from the crowns of which you could look far in every direction to the distant hills which lay blue against every horizon. Whenever we tired of playing in the haymow—on which grandfather frowned—or tormenting the animals, or fishing in the lower brook where chub and a species of trout abounded, or running the dogs, we went off to play in the place in the woods which we had come to think of as our own.

Despite old Tom. Tom was the hired man, an old fellow who had lived in the neighborhood for many years and had at last come to work for my grandfather.

"There's things in the woods," he used to say. "Stay out."

"What things?" my sister would demand challengingly.

"Things," he would answer, darkly.

Heading by Virgil Finlay

Never anything more—only his ambiguous words, his dark hints, and his brooding fear of something he could or would not define. We paid no attention to him, except to tease him from time to time, in the way of children; he was so old that he went about muttering to himself, talking about the small events of his life.

Later on, we understood that grandfather had taken him on because he felt sorry for the lonely old man, though he was only a little older than grandfather, if more worn.

THE place in the woods lay southeast of the farm buildings. I think it was my sister Evelyn who first discovered that the trees were arbored over a kind of bank or rise in the earth, which faced westward and on which, just at sunset, the sunlight fell redly, lending to the place a kind of strange, almost unearthly light. The sunlight at this hour penetrated no other part of the place of the pool—only this one, slanting across the landscape, through the woods, to fall from among the boles of the trees to this one spot, and from this spot seeming to reflect in a roseate glow over all the hidden place. And it was my sister, too, who conceived the idea of making of that spot an altar, at which the three of us could celebrate the end of the day and the coming of night.

Of such fantasies is childhood made.

We did not always go to the glade together. Sometimes grandfather put us boys to work at the corn-sheller or in the hay-mow; sometimes Evelyn refused to go fishing with us, having a horror of worms; sometimes she herself was busy in the kitchen with grandmother. She had just turned eight, and was already indulging her imagination by seeing herself a matron who excelled in all the culinary virtues.

One night, after the house was asleep, Evelyn came to the room I shared with cousin Richard.

"Nick, I was at the place in the woods this evening," she whispered, for Dick was asleep.

"Uh-huh," I answered.

"Nick, there was something there."

"Oh, you and old Tom," I said, grinning.

"No, really, cross-my-heart-and-hope to die," she said earnestly.

"What, then?"

"An animal, I think."

"Oh, rabbits," I said in disgust.

"No, a big animal. And someone looked at me from out of the trees."

"You mean a man?" I asked, incredulous.

"I think so."

I wanted to make fun of her, but she was trembling and scared. She stood there biting her lip, wanting me to believe her. I pushed away the book I had been reading and slipped out of bed.

"What did he look like?"

"I'm not sure. An old man. I ran."

"Could it have been Tom?"

"Oh, no—I know Tom."

But I knew it couldn't have been Tom, for he had been with us. At this moment Dick woke up, irritated.

"What's going on?" he demanded, rubbing his eyes sleepily.

I told him.

"Girls are always seeing things," he said.

"I swear," Evelyn said.

"Well, you just go back to bed. We'll investigate," said Dick importantly.

"I want to go along."

"Not now. Tomorrow night."

SHE went back to her own room then, leaving Dick and me to talk about what she might have seen. He preferred to believe it was all Evelyn's imagination. I was not convinced of that. Actually, I did not want to be convinced of it, because the prospect of someone or something really being in the place of the pool was too exciting to brush away so casually. We tried to guess who or what it might be, but of course, we could not. If it were an animal, then of course there must have been a man there, too, to account for the face Evelyn had sworn she had seen. The investigation promised excitement.

None of us thought of saying anything to our grandparents, and our parents were seldom there; they spent most of the week in the city, during our holiday time, and showed up only on the weekends. This was our secret alone, and the place in the woods took on new significance, held new promise.

That next evening we went out to it, though Evelyn was hesitant now that she must face again the mystery which had so seized upon her imagination. It was a beautiful summer evening, with a light west wind blowing. The day had been hot, but was cooling now, and all around us the countryside rang with the songs of larks and thrushes, of robins and killdeers. It was just at sundown that we pushed into the place of the pool.

The reddening light of the setting sun lay against the little knoll. There was something on it.

"What's that?" demanded Dick, looking accusingly at Evelyn.

Evelyn made futile gestures with her hands She explained,

haltingly. On her way to the place yesterday she had found a dead sparrow. She had intended to bury it there. But once she had put it down, she had become convinced that the dead bird ought to be given a funeral by fire.

"I know it's funny, but I thought it ought to be cut open and bled, only of course it was dead and wouldn't bleed and so the next best thing was to build a fire under it; so I gathered all the twigs and some of those dry leaves and put them on the altar. . . ."

"What altar?" I asked.

"Why, that altar," she said, pointing to the rise in the bank. Dick looked at me and sniffed. "Girls are like that," he said heavily.

"Only, I didn't have a match," finished Evelyn.

"Well, I have," said Dick, grinning.

And off he went to set fire to the leaves and twigs under the dead sparrow. It started to blaze at once with an orange flame. For a moment the glade shone with sunlight and fire; then the sunlight faded as the sun slipped under the horizon, and only the little fire burned there.

It was then that the first change came to the place in the woods. Suddenly out of the hush came a feeling of ineffable wildness; it was as if trees, leaves, grass, even the water were springing to life against our intrusion. And at the same time that we were conscious of this, we heard what was undeniably the sound of somebody blowing on a flute or something of that sort, making a kind of weird, piping music, followed by the sound of something jumping up and down on the ground—an animal. And the limbs of the trees began to move as if a wind was in them.

I glanced at Dick. He, too, had heard.

I LOOKED toward Evelyn. But she was standing transfixed, staring at the little grove of cedars just behind the altar; her eyes were wide, and her lips were parted. On the instant she gave a wild cry of terror and ran back, right into Dick, knocking him in turn into me, and she went out of the place in the woods, screaming in fright.

Had she seen something? Had we? I thought there had been something in the cedars. I did not stop to look. Neither did Dick. Both of us ran pell-mell after Evelyn, and we did not stop until we were half way back to the farm, and all alone in a wide expanse of pasture which still seemed to glow a little from the declining day shining yet in an afterglow to the west, where the evening star and the new moon hung pale yellow.

"Well, what did you see?" I demanded.

"Didn't you see it?"

"Don't think so," I answered. "Did you, Dick?"

"How could I? With her carrying on like that."

"I saw him again. That man."

"I think there was something there," said Dick thoughtfully. "But if I can depend on my nose, it was an animal. It smelled like an animal—you know the kind of smell animals have. Strong."

Now that he had mentioned it, I too knew that I had smelled something. A musk. It might have been an animal. On the other hand, that sparrow's feathers were beginning to burn and it might have been that. I pointed this out.

"I saw a man," my sister said stubbornly. "He had a little beard."

"An old man?"

"I'm not sure."

"You said he had a beard."

"I know. But I don't think he was old."

Dick looked at me and shrugged as much as to say, "That's girls for you."

We talked for a while longer. We couldn't get anywhere. We decided at last that each of us had felt or seen something strange. We decided, too, that burning the sparrow had had something to do with it. And we agreed to go back there, just as soon as we could find something to sacrifice, something alive that we could kill without doing anybody any harm.

IT WAS three days before our chance came.

That morning Tom came in while we were eating breakfast and said to grandmother that three chickens appeared to be sick, and ought to be killed. He had been watching them for two days now, and they weren't improving. Better to kill them than let them infect the whole flock. Grandmother agreed and said simply, "Kill them, then."

The moment he left the kitchen, I was after him.

"Tom, we want one of those sick chickens," I said.

" 'Tain't no good, Nick. It's gonna die."

"We want to kill it," I said.

"Bloodthirsty, ain't you? Whyn't you take 'em all three?"

"We just need one."

He looked at me with a sideways glance. "What're you up to?"

I assured him we weren't up to anything, and kept on badgering him until he agreed that we might have one of the chickens. Without delay, I went with him —I suppose because I didn't entirely trust him—and got the chicken immediately, tying a string to one of its legs to make sure it wouldn't get away. I took

the chicken away from the barnyard and tied it to an ash tree on the way to the pasture. Old Tom watched me with grave curiosity and frowning disapproval.

That evening, just as soon as supper was done, the three of us collected the chicken, which was all but dead, and set out across the pasture for the place of the pool.

We were all wildly excited. The quick fear we had known before was already lost in the past, and we were anxious to try again. This time, we vowed, we would not break ranks and run, but would stand our ground to see what might be there. Somehow, we were convinced the chicken and the sacrifice were important.

It was a wonderful night, just like the other, except that there were a few dark, louring clouds in the west. From among them, now and then, the sunlight streaked through, over the fields and pastures, against the hills, showing rose and lavender. Already the pale moon showed in the sky, though the sun was still above the horizon.

The place in the woods was lighted by the setting sun; a haze of old rose bathed the tree-trunks and the place that Evelyn had called an altar. We had not been back there since the night we had burned the sparrow; now only ashes lay there, black where the grass had been burned away.

I carried the chicken and took it over to the altar.

The sunlight shone redly on its white feathers.

"Do we have to have a fire?" asked Evelyn.

We had not thought of that.

Dick said, "Not yet. We can kill it first. Then we can burn it."

That was agreed upon. Then it was a matter of how it should be killed.

My sister thought it ought to be stabbed to death. Girls always seemed to be more bloodthirsty than boys. Dick was for more refinement than that, and so was I. The poor chicken was hardly able to sit erect; its head drooped, and you could see that it would probably not last till morning. It was a mercy to kill it.

"We'll slit its throat," said Dick.

He had brought his jack-knife, and now he took it out and opened it.

"I won't look," said Evelyn, staring right at the chicken to make sure she wouldn't miss a drop of blood.

I RAISED an objection. If we were making a sacrifice of the chicken, we ought to know to what we were sacrificing it. We couldn't sacrifice it to God, because chickens were not the kind

of sacrifice to make to him. We couldn't sacrifice it to an animal or a face, either, Dick pointed out.

"I know," said Evelyn. "We'll make the sacrifice to the place—the place of the woods and the pool."

To this we all agreed.

Dick took his place beside the chicken.

"Somebody ought to pray," he said.

"We will," said Evelyn.

She knelt down. Somewhat reluctantly, I followed her example.

My sister knew just what to say. "To you, woods' spirit, we offer up this creature. We make this sacrifice to the oaks and the birches, to the beeches and the cedars, to the water of the brook and the pool, to the fish and the sky and the birds and the animal we can hear but cannot see, and the player of the music. . . ."

So she had heard that music, too, I thought!

The last sunlight slipped away from the mound where the chicken lay just as Dick made a dramatic gesture and pulled up its head. With one sweep, he bent and slit its throat. The blood ran redly down the white feathers.

Suddenly, just as before, everything was changed.

The place in the woods which had always seemed a haven for us seemed suddenly charged with danger. It grew darker than the pasture beyond the woods, the hushing of the leaves sounded more loudly, and the limbs and branches began to thresh together as if a storm were brewing among them. The cedars began to tremble and I could hear that music again, a thin, faraway piping, growing steadily more loud, coming closer. And I could hear the tapping of feet.

"He's coming," said Evelyn huskily. She reached for my hand and clung to me.

"Remember," said Dick in a trembling voice. "We won't move."

"We're waiting," I said with a stoutness I did not feel.

Then I knew it was bad to stay, I knew there was terrible danger. The wind was pulling at us, and Evelyn's face was white, and that music was wild, wilder than the wind, and a horrible face, a face that was both old and young, peered out of the cedars. With one accord, we broke away from the altar and ran.

But the very trees had turned against us. Now their branches swept down to make a kind of prison, barring our way. We flung ourselves upon them, screaming for help now, spurred by a terrible fear. Behind us came the sound of oncoming feet, like a deer's, almost overcoming

us with dread. None of us dared turn to look.

At that moment old Tom burst into the place in the woods. He came fiercely in among the trees, swinging his arms, breaking the branches which barred us from the pasture and the far buildings still held in half-daylight, half-moonlight so near and yet so far. Gratefully, we flowed around him, past him, and streaked across the pasture for the safety of the house, never pausing a moment, but running wildly into the house where our parents had just come, for it was Friday night, and midsummer eve, the eve of their holiday, too.

"Indians!" said my father.

"Oh, be quiet, children," said my Aunt Leonie. "I've such a headache."

But grandfather sensed at once that something was wrong. "What's up?" he demanded. "What have you children been up to?"

Breathlessly, we told him, each of us, in snatches of words. And at last, we turned back the way we had come and in one voice cried, "Ask Tom!"

But Tom was not there.

Tom had not come with us.

Tom was nowhere in the house or the barn or the barnyard.

THEY set out at once for the place in the woods, and would not let us come along. And when they came back and told us Tom wasn't coming back again, Tom was dead, he had had a heart attack, we could hardly believe it. We went to bed subdued and contrite, sure that somehow we had brought about Tom's end, and cried to think of it because he had been kind for all his gruff ways, and he had saved us. We did not know from what, but we knew with the unerring instinct of children that he had saved us from something terrible beyond words.

And late that night, waking from sleep, I crept out and listened at the register to what they were saying below.

"Hoof-marks?" My mother was talking. "But there aren't any animals in that part of the woods. Never were. Or are you pasturing it now, Pa?"

"No." That was my grandfather's voice.

"They were there, all right," said my Uncle Sherwood. "All over."

"My God, yes," said my father again. "Cut into his head and his hands and all around that chicken. How did *that* get there, anyway?"

"You could ask the children," said grandmother.

"No, not one single word to the children," said Aunt Leonie.

"There'll be an inquest, of course."

"But what kind of animal?"

"They were small hoof-marks, relatively. A sheep perhaps. Is there an old ram loose hereabouts?"

"No."

"Or a goat?"

"No."

"Well, a deer, then."

"Some wild animal, perhaps. A domesticated animal would hardly have killed. I don't see yet how it could have been done, unless, of course, he had really had a heart attack and it was done when he was down. . . ."

THAT was twenty years ago. And the place in the woods left untouched, undisturbed, so that the brook could murmur through it, as always, and the hushing in the leaves keep on in the absence of the birds, and the mound of earth we had called an altar could catch the roseate light of every setting sun. . . .

Until yesterday, when I came upon shocking news in the paper, news about the old Norris farm, still in the family, but being rented now, about a small boy who had been found mysteriously slain in the woods southeast of the farm buildings, with pointed hoof-marks all over his body—a story to jog memory sharply, but no longer the memory of a boy who could not know what he had seen or heard, who could not fully understand.

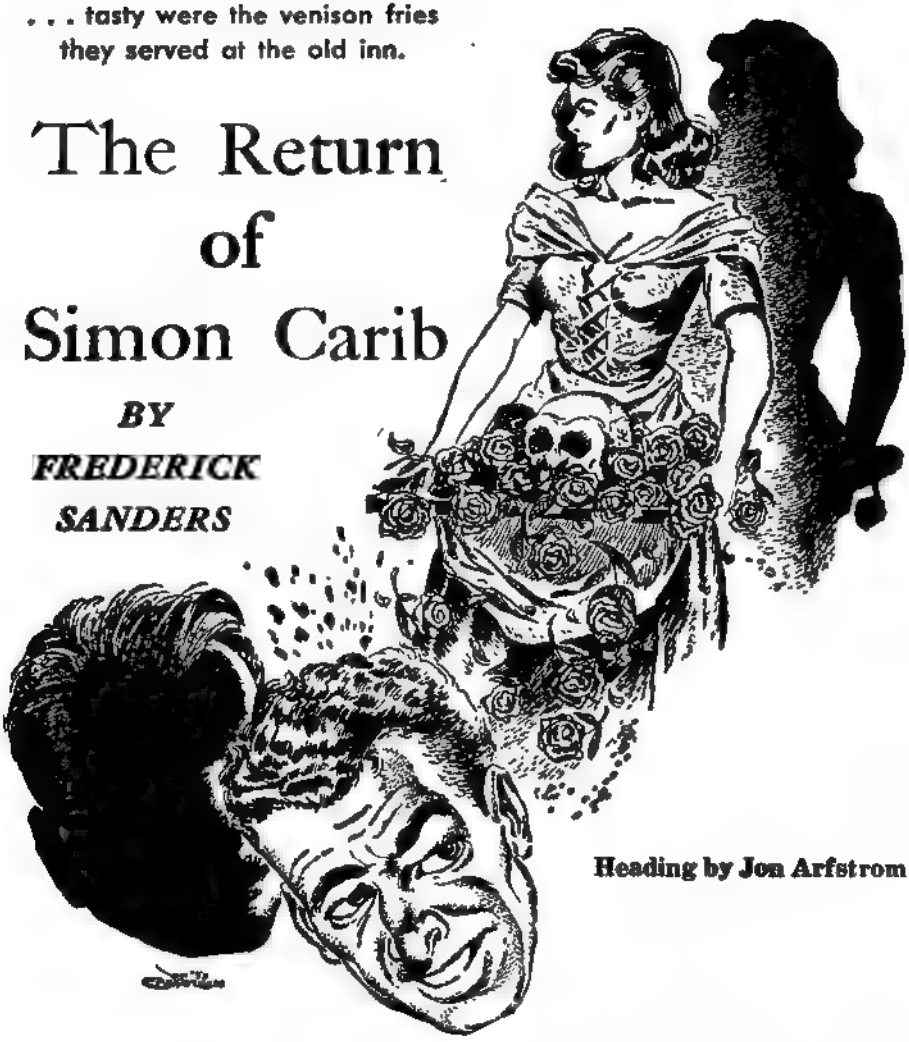
Perhaps, long ago, old Tom had understood, even if he could not put into words what he knew by an intuition common to people close to the earth and the elements. We had no way of knowing.

Grandfather gone, father gone, too, Uncle Sherwood too old to care, Evelyn in Europe. I telephoned Dick, and he met me at once at the railroad station, to go down with me and see to it that the trees at the place of the pool were cut down, and the cedars uprooted, and the pool drained, knowing that there are places on the face of this earth where ancient things die hard, where old gods linger long past their time, drawing unwitting homage to deities long since embalmed in textbooks, all but forgotten, names like Zeus, Bacchus, and Persephone—and Pan.

. . . tasty were the venison fries they served at the old inn.

The Return of Simon Carib

BY FREDERICK SANDERS



Heading by Jon Arfstrom

I

THE November fog was everywhere. It swirled around the old churchyard on the hill and touched with chilly breath the faded inscriptions on the old tombs that had once been names. In the town below ghostly lights seeped through the brownish blanket of freezing vapor and only subdued sounds of traffic filtered out into the blankness of the treacherous night. Yet this damp detestable horror did not worry me, for I was in a warm

haven of dryness and soft light with the mouth-watering aroma of good food not far away.

As a traveler in tobacco my work takes me far and wide in the country, and though many years have inured me to all weathers, I can appreciate all the more comfort and good food where they can be encountered upon the roads. Either from established places known to me and others of my occupation or upon those now and again chance drop-ins at strange places in new territory that come up to more than one's estimation where plates have to be covered with something substantial and glasses filled with liquid to sustain the mind and warm in winter the chilled cockles of our hearts. The "HAPPY TRAVELERS EATING HOUSE," in which I found myself ensconced this moisture-drenched evening of November, was such a place. If it had not been for the terrific fog making visibility almost nil, I should not have got off my usual bearings and become temporarily lost in the old cathedral city of Oldchester, that I knew in the main, as well as I did the backs of my own hands. In losing myself, I discovered the Happy Travelers as I furtively cruised my small motor-van down a steeply narrow street to where I hoped to pick up the old winding High Street, from where I could make my fog-bound way to my last port of call for that day.

It was a splash of red seen through the mist that signaled to my mind and made me think "This is it," as I drew into the gutter, braked and switched off the engine. And "This" was it! As I got out of the car the warm red curtains over a long narrow window glowed from the light behind them. Over the top of the window I read "The Happy Travelers Eating House." I opened the door and went in to find myself in a largish room with a low ceiling. Long high backed seats faced each other across highly polished tables. Clean smelling pine sawdust was scattered over the boarded floor and in a tidy sized old fashioned fireplace, spitting away merrily upon the fire-dogs were logs of cherry wood sweetening the air. Candles, in tall copper candlesticks, placed at strategic points about the room and upon the tables combined to give a cheerful illumination.

I hung my hat, overcoat and scarf upon one of several wooden pegs which seemed to do duty as a clothes' rack near the window. Then, settling myself in a corner of one of the seats nearest the fire, I relaxed. How clean, warm and comfortable, I mused. So quiet.

Stealing into the room came a cozy aroma of cooking from somewhere beyond. It seemed

that I had stumbled upon one of those places of refreshment one does come across in these modern times that are modelled on the lines of eating-places of a hundred and fifty or more years past. A place designed for an exclusive clientele of men, who were not exactly epicures, or gluttons, but who appreciate good food, nicely cooked and well-served. I rubbed my hands, and was just about to ring a small highly-polished brass bell near at hand, when a form passed into the room, tripped briskly across the sawdered floor and stood before me. It wore an ample ankle-length dress of blue, had a beautifully corseted waist above which a snow-white blouse coyly emphasized a delicately modelled bosom. But the face! Ah! that countenance! I know that I shall never see its counterpart again, at least not in this world! Then the vision spoke and set my heart racing mad. "An' it please you, Peg O'Myhart, at your service, sir."

II

WITH my nerves all a-tingle and a peculiar sensation flowing along my spine, I gazed up at Peg O'Myhart. I caught my breath, for there, in the mellow candlelight I perceived a face of such beauty and sweet innocence that I was tempted to think that she would suddenly sprout wings and so like an angel—for she really looked like one—spread them and vanish away. She did neither. Instead she informed me that there was roast pheasant, after which there would be served a special pudding three years old, kept with brandy. And as I gazed at her great blue eyes and mobile red lips, with just that added fullness as if a bee had lightly stung them, I thought "This *is* an exclusive show. Pheasant and brandy-pudding! A pretty penny this will cost me!" So I ordered supper and was rewarded with a devastating smile and a neat old-fashioned curtsy and Peg O'Myhart disappeared away to where the choice aromas of cooking escaped.

I really did enjoy that dish of pheasant and I am rather afraid that I overcame good-manners to openly feast my eyes upon the lovely Peg when she served it and again when she cleared the dishes preparatory to the second course.

I had nearly finished the intoxicatingly good pudding when a slight sound made me glance up to see a tall lithe man approaching the table. He wore a short-waisted cut-away jacket with shining metal buttons and sported a most exquisitely embroidered colored waistcoat surmounted with a cravat of Alpine whiteness. His nether limbs were encased in rather tight fitting

black trousers, and gleaming polished wellingtons, from the sides of which depended golden-corded tassels putting the finishing touch to this old-time male ensemble. "Nothing like keeping up the clothes of the period to go with the surroundings," I thought. As he stood before me I noted his light brown skin, dark eyes, fullish lips and crinkly hair. An Indian type and a cultured one, I noted mentally. Then in a very English voice barring a slight slur, he bowed, saying, "Simon Carib, keeper of the Happy Travelers, sir. I hope everything is to your satisfaction?"

As he finished his introduction I popped the last spoonful of the rich dark-brown pudding into my mouth, set down the spoon, and answered him that I had enjoyed everything. The dining room, the courtesy, the well-cooked meal and the charming waitress.

"Yes," retorted Simon, "she is a winsome lass. Been here several months, and has endeared herself to all hearts. In fact she is what one would call a 'toothsome morsel,' sir." At that precise moment the charming Peg tripped in, removed the spoon and empty plate, smiled and tip-tapped her way out of the room.

"Indeed she is, Mister Carib," and I glanced at his shining face as he and I framed a sentence, which, when spoken blended into one and the same, "Quite sweet enough to eat!" We laughed, and said Simon, "Two minds with but a single thought betwixt them. There is no doubt that girls like young Peg can be to us mere males a consuming desire. Though it may well be it is our own hearts we eat out over their artless though artful ways." We chuckled. Winked at each other.

Then the quarter-chimes from the old cathedral clock nearby told that it was a quarter to eight o'clock. This would not do, for I had to get to my last place of business by eight—closing time. I asked my score and Simon asked me a sum but half what I had expected. A trifle surprised I paid him, leaving a tip for Peg. He saw me to the door, and remarked that I had picked a good time to have my supper, for soon the London coach would arrive with a goodly crowd who would soon make the eating room ring with quip and jest and much chatter.

"Come here at the same time a week from today, sir. We shall have a rare dish—specially cooked venison pie from a little deer fed and fattened to a nicety under my personal supervision. Good night, sir, good night!" The fog had cleared a trifle and going to the end of the road, I emerged from under the old gatehouse archway, into the near de-

serted street. As I edged out into the main thoroughfare, I noticed the name of the street of the Happy Travelers. It was named, Corncockle.

III

FIVE minutes later I parked my car outside the shop of Phineas Fagg, retail tobacconist, the local historian of Oldchester and president of the select Oldchester Historical Society, and was soon seated at the back of his commodious shop, in his little private office, pen in hand and order-book open for his list of requirements. Phineas was a sparse little man of some sixty summers. Soon our business was transacted and I arose to go. "I fully expect you will be very glad to get back to Medvale Town and a good hot supper this unfelicitous night, Mr. Sprucer," remarked Phineas. "As a matter of fact," I rejoined, "I have dined well at a new place I discovered but an hour ago!"

"Ah! The 'Tudor Rose Cafe' I presume, that only opened this week at the other end of the High Street?"

"Not the 'Tudor' but a 'new-old' cafe if one can call it such up in Corncockle Street," I replied.

Phineas opened his eyes wide, and I could see that I had caught him on the hop. He didn't know. "Yes; a place called 'The Happy Travelers Eating House' not far up from the old city Gate House. And rare food they serve up and at a price to suit the pockets of commercials."

Phineas looked fully surprised, then he suddenly got excited, a rare thing for him, and he could only stutter out "B-b-but t-that i-is im-pup-pup-possible, Mr. Sprucer!"

Then a rap came at the office door and one of his two assistants came in to remark to Phineas that the cash register had jammed, and would he please come out to try to release it, so that he could finish checking up the day's receipts.

So thanking Phineas for his order I bid him good night, to leave him to wrestle with the recalcitrant register. Whether it was sheer amazement or the heralding of fear that shone in his eyes as they followed me to the shop door, I could not be sure, but in a few moments I was out in the fog again, ready to drive away home.

A WEEK soon slipped by and it was order-day for Oldchester again. It had been a cold hard day and now, at half past six in the evening, the rime of frost was present under the moonlight. I was ahead of schedule as I cruised along the High Street, thinking of The Happy

Travelers—and pretty Peg. I turned the motor van under the Gate House archway and moved up the steep ascent of Corncockle Street, looking out for the lighted red-curtains of the eating house. I was just about to pass a blank-faced, unlighted building when a glimmer of light manifested itself and a dull red spot appeared at the lower window. I pulled over to the other side and got out. Sure enough, the red-gleam in the window grew and grew as someone—no doubt Peg—lit candle after candle in the room behind. I crossed over, pushed open the door and was in the warm atmosphere of the dining room, with its cheerful fire and candlelight, but no one was present.

Evidently the lighter of candles had just left the room as I had been about to enter.

So I hung up my coat, hat and scarf and settled myself down where I had seated myself a week before. A few moments later there sounded a patter of feet in the outer passage, and in at the door came a lovely well-knit dark-haired maiden who quickly tripped across to me, and, dropping a swift curtsy said, "If it please you, sir. Maria Lovelace, at your service, sir." I was sorry not to see Peg, and I surmised that the establishment kept more than one waitress. Then, into the room walked Simon, and, crossing to us, bowed to me, wishing me a "Good evening."

Turning to Maria he asked, "Has cook got the first of the special venison pies ready?" Maria replied that she had and that they smelt uncommonly delicious.

"Then," said Simon, "bring a goodly portion for our gentleman here, for I am sure he has had a long cold day behind him."

"And where, if I may be so bold as to ask, is our fair Peg tonight, Mr. Carib?" I inquired.

"She was called away three days ago, to her poor dear mother, who lies exceedingly ill in London, sir. I do miss her, as do we all. But young Maria Lovelace is an apt pupil and fills her place admirably well, until Miss Peg can be with us again, sir."

We chatted of this and of that until the dark-haired Maria brought in the pie and placed it before me. I sniffed the aroma. Such cooking! Such rare meat! And the smell of delicately applied cooking herbs pervading it. "I will now leave you in peace, to enjoy your supper, sir!" remarked Simon. "I am sure you will say when you have partaken of it that you have never eaten anything so truly rare and tender before. Every few months I treat my customers to such regal meat and, I may add, I eat a goodly fill myself, for to venison pie I am very partial, as was my fath-

er and grandfather before me. Indeed sir, the cooking recipe was handed down from my great-grandparents." Then softly he quitted the dining room, leaving me to enjoy such a meal as I had never tasted before.

IV

BY THE time I arrived at Phineas Fagg's shop, I was feeling fully repleted, warm and happy—right on top of the world. I went through into his little office, gave him a cheery greeting and the usual handshake.

"You seem full of snap and vim this evening, Mr. Sprucer," remarked the kindly old historian. "And so would you be, my friend, if you had dined and wined like I have, at the Happy Travelers," I replied. "In these modern times it is not many restaurants, if any at all, that dish up venison-pie for a weary traveler's supper!"

"Venison?" the word was like the last of an echo from the old man's lips. "Where is this 'Happy Travelers Rest' you you speak about?" He was eyeing me, so I thought, rather warily.

"In Corncockle Street, Mr. Fagg. You must pop up there one evening—dine out, you know."

Slowly he replied, "That I cannot do, my dear friend, for the eating-house, you mention does not exist!"

Something in his words made me short-tempered. "Call me a liar then! Go on! Just because you happen to know a great deal about this locality no one else must know anything!"

He was very decent, was old Phineas, for he smiled in a queer way and patted my arm, saying "Now, now, listen to me, Tom Sprucer. Corncockle Street exists, but the eating-house you speak of ceased to be a place of call as far back as the winter of 1820. The house is still there, but it has had a very chequered career, and for the past thirty years it has remained empty, fast falling into decay."

"But . . . Mr. Fagg!" was all I could reasonably say.

Phineas went on. "You have seen the past come back, my friend. You have been seeing ghosts of people dead and gone for over a century. I have heard of such things, but never experienced such myself. See here, Tom." (And Phineas moved over to a small bookcase from which he took a large leather-covered book, placing it on the desk before me.) "Here you can read of the old 'Happy Travelers Rest' from a cutting from an old county journal published back in 1820."

He opened the old well-thumbed press-cuttings book and

pointed to a yellowy-brown cutting affixed on one of the pages. I read with growing apprehension and horror the account of happenings—and of people whom I had recently seen—that occurred but five short years after the Battle of Waterloo!

A DASTARDLY DEVIL BROUGHT TO JUSTICE.

"Early yesterday morning, the 14th of November, a light-colored man by the name of Simon Carib was apprehended for the murder of Miss Peg O'Myhart who had been in his employ as a serving-maid at his eating-house, The Happy Travelers Rest in Corncockle Street, of this town. Miss Maria Lovelace, a quick-witted girl last in his employ had noticed many peculiarities about her employer and coupled with a bone she found protruding from the earthen floor of the large cellar beneath the house, laid information with the local authority who brought down Bow Street detectives, who had the house surrounded and the fiend Simon Carib placed under arrest.

"The cellar was dug up and the remains of eight bodies, all young women, were disclosed.

"Carib confronted with all his guilt broke down and confessed to killing them all and from the choicest portions of these youthful serving-maids, whom he kept and fed well, feasting upon them and to making 'venison pies' for his special customers. Carib is a near descendent of cannibals who up till quite recent years still lived and practiced cannibalism on one of the remoter isles of the West Indies.

"Owing to his confession we hope very shortly to see this fiend incarnate hung from the old Hanging Oak opposite the UNICORN INN, at the four-went-way on Pendleton Heath. Good seats for the hanging can be obtained from the offices of this newspaper at half-a-guinea per numbered ticket."

V

AND now I did want to believe that all that had passed was but a phantasm—an abnormal state of mind caused somehow from remote psychic influences. My horror must have shown itself in my face. A face, that I perceived in the small wall-mirror opposite to me, of a peculiar yellowish-green with dead white nose and bloodless lips set with two dark-rimmed staring eyes.

Old Phineas called out to me, "Don't let it worry you Tom! What you saw—what you ate—did not, could not, have really existed."

My stomach seemed to be tying itself into a great and

painful knot. I heard myself crying out in anguish, "But the venison-pie! I ate it! It was SO REAL! Everything was SO REAL!" And I remember saying to that—that—Simon, "She was QUITE SWEET ENOUGH TO EAT!" Pretty Peg O'Myhart whom he described as a toothsome morsel. Phineas, Phineas, that PIE, made from a little "deer!" A "LITTLE DEER"—BUT IT WAS DEAR PEG—DEAR PEG O'MYHART!

MY INNER-SELF became a complicated contortion of anguishing pain. Then I was horribly, excruciatingly ill. A crimson mist obscured my vision and a final wrench of the great knot inside sent me, with a gigantic spasm of agony into merciful oblivion.

Witch Woman

By DOROTHY QUICK

WITCH woman, witch woman, the necklace you wear
Is brighter than rubies, as red and as rare.
Of dark rowan berries strung taut as a wire
From whom did you get them? And for what strange hire?

Witch woman, witch woman, those earrings of gold,
What service won them? What deed can't be told?
Never had gypsy so pretty a pair
Nor lady in castle such glitter to wear.

Witch woman, witch woman, the great silver ring
That circles your finger, whence came such a thing?
A melting of silver, of bone, and of gem,
Only a witch could be sporting of them.

Witch woman, witch woman, what hangs at your sash?
For that whip of leather whose heart did you smash?
For that whip of leather whose back will you break,
And where is the treasure your fingers will take?

Witch woman, witch woman, your eyes open wide,
What will their blackness lure to your side?
"Stop asking questions I can't answer true,
Or the day might come when I'll question you!"

Witch woman, witch woman, come weave me a spell,
To bring back my lover, that I can keep well,
"No, no, do not tempt me, no spell for your whim
Could ever be keeping a good man like him."

Witch woman, witch woman, then what will you make,
A spell or a potion for your true love's sake?
"Never a potion and never a brew
To bind such as him to the likes of you!

He gave me my necklace, my earrings of gold
My ring of bright silver and monies untold,
And yet you have caught him by book and by bell.
And I, the witch woman, am under his spell."

Witch woman, witch woman, now what have I done
By bell, book and candle what have I won?
My good man loves you, he's under your grip.
Oh no! Don't be raising that terrible whip.

"Go home to your good man with blood on your hide
And never again let him stray from your side
Remember the lashing, remember the pain
And come near the witch woman never again."

The Banshee and Patrick O'Bannon

BY JOE BISHOP

To grasp the Banshee was like trying to hold an armful of the evening breeze.

FEY the people of the village said I was, because it became rumored about that I had seen, talked with, and fought the banshee, and had driven her from Conneman's Bog. There was some truth in the rumors and much exaggeration, so at the desire of Doctor O'Connor I am telling how it came about.

You may not believe me as I have no mortal witness as proof of what I write, but if it is ever given you to meet Boree, the leprechaun, or Willie the Wisp, he of the bog light, they will tell you the tale much as I have set it down here.

IT WAS an evening of deep cloudiness, and a light mist was falling when I arrived at the home of Sean McManus near the edge of Conneman's Bog. Sean was in bed with a raging fever, and I was to wait outside the house for Doctor O'Connor who was caring for the lad. It was while I was waiting that the banshee started her wailing.

The wail started low, and at first I thought it was but the wind rising. But as the mournful sound rose higher, I knew it for what it was. Up and down it went, moaning low and howling high, as though a thousand devils were bewailing their banishment from Paradise.

I have no strength of heart for such sorrowful sounds, so I made for the house where the presence of others would give me comfort. Doctor O'Connor was seated beside the bed in Sean's room watching his patient, with Annie McManus, Sean's mother, standing behind him.

Sean, a bright, brawny lad, had worn himself out working hard as he was in the government at Dublin, and he had returned to his mother's home for rest and comfort. He had been home but three days when the fever struck him. Now he was rolling and tossing on the bed, his feverish face twisted as though beset by the devils of darkness intent on taking his soul. Annie, though dry-eyed, had the look of a mother fearful of losing her son.

"You know yourself, Doctor," she was saying as I entered the room, "that when the banshee wails it means the death of some mortal. And Sean is near to his end."

Heading by Jon Arfstrom

"Enough of those old wives' tales," Doctor O'Connor interrupted. "You should know better than to believe such superstitions, Annie McManus. Sean is not near his end. It's the noise from the bog which is disturbing him more than the sickness. Come morning, and we'll move him to a quieter place."

"Be that as it may, Doctor," Annie replied, "but 'tis myself believe the tale." She moved slowly toward the door. " 'Tis a bad night out," she went on. "I'll be making a cup of tea."

IT WOULD be a pity should Sean die, for he was Annie's only child and his death would be a frantic loss to her. Besides, Sean and his mother were well liked in the village and the country about, not only by their mortal friends but also by the little people. For Sean was always ready to help others, myself included, and Annie often put out milk for the leprechauns and honey for the fairies.

Doctor O'Connor gave me a sidelong glance as Annie left the room.

"It's a story many believe even in these days, Patrick," he said, "that the banshee lies quiet in her bog-nest until she smells the near-death approaching. Neither the odorous atmosphere of the bog at night, nor the fragrant breezes from the meadows during the day disturb her. But let the stench of the near-death float through the air, she will arouse from her lethargy to start a keening and wailing which mortal ears can hardly tolerate."

Which was the truth, though few mortals believed it. I had learned of the banshee from Boree, the leprechaun, for I had never met the woman. Boree, a brave, daring little fellow, roamed the bog at will and knew her. But no one could know her well, he admitted, for she was a dour, unpredictable old witch who made friends with none of the other little people.

And though usually silent, the banshee's wail once started could not be stopped. No mortal dared go near her; for all he knew her keening may be the sounding of his own death knell. And seldom would the other little people enter the bog when the banshee was near, for they were a gentle, kindly folk who shy away from all harshness and violence. They know that death follows in the wake of the keening, and death is the one thing they do not fully understand.

ANNIE returned with the tea, and we sat sipping in silence watching Sean. Sean's restless body would not be stilled, and there was naught we could do for him.

Doctor O'Connor finished his cup and rose to his feet. He started pacing the floor, his worried eyes moving from Sean to me and back again toward Sean.

"It's that hellish banshee causing this with her senseless clamor," he finally burst out. "Her wailing has disturbed the latent devils of the fever in Sean, bringing them to a stronger life. Can you do nothing to stop that bedlam-turned-loose, Patrick? It will be the death of Sean, for he cannot be moved safely now."

Sean's mother looked toward me, worried but silent. But what could I do? Big as I was I feared the banshee, and to go searching for her through the bog at night might be the death of me also.

"How can I stop her yowling, Doctor?" I asked. "It is said she cannot be seen by mortals, and though found her wailing cannot be stopped until death crosses the threshold."

"You are afraid, Patrick," the doctor replied. "Had I but half your influence with the little people, I would go myself. It's a God-given gift you have, laddie, that you can see and talk with the fairies and elves, the leprechauns and others to whom the eyes of ordinary mortals are blind. With your gift, you could surely see the banshee and persuade her to silence her lamentations."

This was the first time Doctor O'Connor had ever spoken of my ability to see and talk with the little people. But that being as it may, I had no courage to face the banshee on her own boggy ground.

"Or are you really afraid to try, Patrick?" the doctor went on.

Yes, I was afraid. With the keening of the bog spirit ringing in my ears, I was afraid. For though it was said that the wailing of the banshee was only for those who were ill and near death, others had heard the wailing who were stricken down while in the prime of health.

"I don't blame you for not going if you are afraid, Patrick," the doctor said, "but there is no other to send."

I went outside without answering. I could not stomach the doctor's harsh words, nor stand up to the appeal in the eyes of Sean's mother. I was a coward, for I feared the banshee, though I knew I could find and see her even in the darkness of the bog.

The light from Sean's bedroom lighted my way as I wandered toward the bog. Around me I could sense the closeness of the little people, and I was wondering what brought them out in the darkness of the night when I met Boree.

The leprechaun was seated on a slender limb which crossed my path, and I might have passed him unknowing—for my eyes

were blurred to the sight of the little people with the thought of my feardness—had he not put out a hand to stop me.

"And what might be pothering you now, Patrick?" he asked. "Is it that the wailing has addled your brain so ye cannot see your friends? Tell me, Patrick, why do you pass us by?"

The fog cleared from my eyes then, and I saw the fairies and elves and leprechauns gathered as though for a conference. And off to one side, his light covered, stood Willie the Wisp.

"Tell me, Patrick, what might be troubling ye?" Boree went on.

I spared not myself, but told Boree of my cowardice. Boree shook his head when I had finished.

"Ye might find the banshee," he stated. "All ye need is to follow your ears to yon racket. But ye cannot stop her clamor while the scent of the near-death is in the air. For that ye must get rid of her."

"Get rid of her?" I asked. "How can one like me get rid of her who cannot be killed? Answer me that, Boree, and I'll find the courage to face her though it be the death of me."

" 'Tis true ye cannot kill her," Boree replied, his round, elfin face now grave sober, "for she is not mortal. But there is a way to stop her yowling, and we are here to see what might be done about it. And we need you, Patrick. Will ye help us? Will ye agree to do what we ask without reason or *que*stion?"

It was a difficult problem he was facing me with. If I agreed to help them, I would have to do as Boree said willy-nilly be it for good or bad. But I had much faith in Boree. He was a tricky little old man, always up to troublesome mischief; but he forever knew what he was doing, and never suffered unpleasantness for his pranks.

" 'Twill help Sean if we succeed," Boree went on. "There'll be some discomfort for yourself, Patrick. Ye may never look the same after ye've met the banshee. But ye will have experienced somewhat no mortal has suffered before and may never again."

"It might even be the death of ye, Patrick," Willie the Wisp put in.

The death of me? I was dying on my feet, torn between the fear of what Boree might want me to do and the displeasure of the little people should I refuse.

It was the keening of the bog spirit, a moaning lamentation of sorrow and woe, and the appearance of Doctor O'Connor in the door of the house which decided me.

"Do you be going home now, Patrick," the doctor called, though I doubt he could see me in the darkness. "There is naught

we can do for Sean this night. I'll stay here."

I did not reply, but turned to Boree.

"What is it you wish me to do?" I asked.

"Good lad," Boree answered. "Ye will go into the bog till ye find the banshee. Draw her attention to yourself. Ye may have trouble, for she is a disagreeable wench, and will not take pleasure at your coming. Talk with her. Make mortal love to her if need be. Fight with her if ye must. But make her move around all ye can, for while she is active she cannot wail. 'Twill give us time to set a plan in motion which should silence her."

"What are you going to do?" I asked. "If I should stop her wailing, for how long must it be?"

"Who knows?" Boree replied, "for your time means naught to us. Just keep her on the go as long as ye are able. I cannot tell ye what we have in mind, Patrick, but if it turns out as we hope, all will be well."

"Coming, Patrick?" Doctor O'Connor called.

"Do ye not mind him," Boree broke in before I could answer. "Ye must be leaving with no regrets. Willie the Wisp will light your way through the bog."

"But only till we near the lady," Willie the Wisp stated. "I have not the stomach to talk with nor even look at the old hag."

"Then be off with ye. And don't forget the part ye are to play, Willie-Wisp, or I'll knock the daylights out of ye."

I HEARD no more from Doctor O'Connor. Likely he thought I had returned home. Willie the Wisp danced ahead of me, his flickering light guiding my feet through the muck of the bog. The lamentations of the banshee grew louder as we advanced, and soon Willie the Wisp halted.

"I go no farther," he stated positively. "Follow your ears to the noise, Patrick. You'll find her. Keep her busy as long as you can, for I have far to go and much to do to carry out my part of the program."

With that his light went out, and I was left alone in the darkness.

I almost turned back. The blackness all about me and the lamentations of the banshee addled my brain, until I knew naught of what I should do. Then the wailing ceased, and the fretful voice of the banshee came from the darkness ahead.

"Who is this come to disturb my lamentations?" she asked. "Be ye mortal, turn back lest my cries be for you. Be ye of the little people, go away."

"It is I, Patrick O'Bannon, a

mortal soul," I replied. "I would have a word with you."

"Patrick O'Bannon, what do ye here?" the banshee asked. "I have heard of ye, and I know there is no harm in ye. Step forward and say your say quickly, for I have much to do this night."

I took a few steps forward through the muck, and my eyes were opened to the sight of the banshee.

She was seated on a tuft of moss, a little old woman no bigger than Bowgene's pig, black with the muck of the bog on her, her features grim and haggard as though she was carrying the weight of all the sins of the world.

"It is about Sean McManus," I said. "Sean is ill and near death. Your lamentations keep him from sleeping, and without sleep he cannot get well."

"And what do ye wish me to do about that?" she asked.

"Cease your wailings so Sean can sleep," I replied. My courage was increasing as we talked, for I could see no harm in this little old woman.

SHE started combing her long hair with her thin fingers. Her drear eyes looked up at me, eyes seemingly weary of her place in the existence of the little people.

"Cease my lamentations?" she asked. "Cease what is the nature within me? Can the sun stop shining? Can a pig refrain from eating? Can ye mortals cease feasting and loving when the mood is upon ye? Since the days of the Tuatha De Danann, the gods of the ancient Firbolg, I have mourned when the death of mortals is near. No, Patrick, I cannot cease my lamentations, for it is the nature of me to mourn when the scent of the near-death comes to my nostrils."

"Then can't you go away," I asked, "to some place where you cannot get the scent of the near-death?"

"That I cannot," she replied. "My nature will not allow me to leave."

"Then my errand here was for nothing?" I asked. "You wouldn't—"

"It was, and I won't," she interrupted. "Be ye gone now, Patrick. 'Tis been nice meeting ye, and if ye come again some other time, I shall be pleased to visit and talk with ye. 'Tis few mortals who have the gift. But now I must be about my duties."

A thin wail floated out into the bog. A mewling plaint which rose higher until it sounded like the desparing cry of a soul lost in the black void between Heaven and Hell. Sean would be badly disturbed by that cry, and there seemed no way of stopping it.

Unless I could use mortal force

on the banshee. Which could be the worse for me if the force would not affect her. But I could only try. Scooping up a gob of mud, I threw it square into her mouth.

The wail stopped as though blocked by choking fingers. The banshee spat out the mud, and I feared of what might happen to myself. But I had to go on now that I had started. I leaped toward the banshee, hoping I might get my arms about her small body and hold her.

She sprang nimbly up and to one side as I leaped, giving me a slight push as I passed her. Though she barely touched me, I staggered and fell headlong into the bog.

I lay still for the moment, smeared with muck and soaked by water. Then I lumped to my feet and faced her, for I knew naught of what she might do and I feared her anger. She stood, a frightful, worrisome figure, but a few feet away.

"Cease, Patrick, ye spalpeen," she cried. "Cease while ye are still able to keep to your feet. This is no place for mortal man to die."

But I could not cease, though it be the death of me. I had given my word to Boree that I would do all I could to silence the banshee, and that word drove me on.

"I will not cease," I shouted, "until I've stopped your yowling."

"Then on your own head be it."

I MOVED toward her, stooping low with my arms wide to grasp her. But it was like trying to catch and hold an armful of the evening breeze. Around and around in the muck we went, with myself slipping and sliding like a pig on ice in my efforts to reach her, she capering around light as a feather and keeping away from my reaching arms. How long this lasted I know not, but her wailings had ceased and there was no noise except for my muddlings in the muck and water. Finally I stopped, for I had no more breath left in me.

The banshee seemed to float in the air before me. My sight was so sullied I could but see her form.

" 'Tis enough now, Patrick," she cried. "Ye have no one but yourself to blame for what will befall ye."

With that she sprang toward me, and gave me a clout on the side of the head which knocked me down.

"Ye have given me quite a time," she went on as I lay there. "Now go ye home and leave me be to my wailings."

Tired, dizzy, and flat in the muck I watched her. She glanced

around, and an air of puzzlement came to her face. Then she smiled grimly and gave a cackling laugh.

"Ye had me distracted for the moment, Patrick," she said, "but I have it now. It pains me to leave ye, laddie, for I would know more of a fine boy like you." A moan as of sadness and sorrow came from her lips as she moved away through the bog. A haunting moan, the sound of which I will never forget.

I clambered to my feet. My knees were weak. I was covered with slime and mire. I didn't know where I was, and I didn't care. My mind was set on but one thing; I had to follow the banshee; must stop her wailing. Of Boree and the other little people I gave but scant thought. I may have failed so far, but I had done the best I could and would carry on.

The banshee was moving toward a glimmer of light which seemed far away in the darkness. That would be the light from the window in Sean's bedroom, for there was no other house could be seen from the bog.

In the black darkness I could see nothing but the light and the small form of the banshee bobbing ahead of me; could feel nothing but my wetness and weariness, and the yearning to be home and in bed; could hear nothing but the slight moaning of the banshee as she moved ahead, straight toward the light.

The light seemed far away; seemed to move farther away as we advanced. I knew that this was not so, but was the blurring of the sight in my bewildered brain.

The banshee soon became strangely silent, and I wondered if the scent of the near-death had left the air; if Sean had died while we were scrabbling in the bog.

After what seemed hours to my fuddled brain, the light ahead drew nearer. We should soon be at the house.

OF THE unnatural silence of the banshee, I gave but little thought. She would halt near the edge of the bog, as near to the window as she could get, and I would again try to silence her if she started her wailing.

Then, with an unexpected suddenness, the light went out.

The banshee stopped. But only for a moment. With a mewling cry she ran ahead for a few yards and stopped again. I caught up with her, keeping far to one side. The end of the bog was in sight, and she stood staring wildly toward a broad, open meadow with no sign of house or light on any side. She turned toward me, a furious light in her eyes.

"Ye omadhaun," she shrieked. "This is some trick of yours,

Patrick O'Bannon. Some mortal trick ye have played on me, to toll me away to some place I know not. 'Tis another clout I'll be giving ye for that."

She leaped toward me, but in her fury she missed as I dodged to one side. I waited not for her rage was evident, but ran up into the meadow where she dare not follow. But her screaming voice blared in my ears.

" 'Tis a smart lad ye think ye are," she shouted. "Ye have the best of me now, Patrick O'Bannon, but it will be a pleasure to me when I have the good fortune to wail at your own near-death."

I ignored her ranting and went on. Beyond the meadow lay a field of flax, and I knew where I was. And there I found Boree and Willie the Wisp waiting.

"Are ye all right, Patrick?" Willie the Wisp asked. "That old harridan didn't hurt you?"

"I'm all right," I replied, "but I'm fair tired."

"Ye should be," Boree said. " 'Twas a good job ye done, Patrick, and I'm proud of ye. Ye bothered the old witch long enough to get her flustered, and when Willie showed his light at the far end of the bog, she took it for the light from Sean's bedroom and followed it. Which I thought she might. But I was sore afraid the old woman would do ye harm."

"She tried to," I answered as we moved toward Annie McManus' home, "but I'm still alive. But tell me, Boree. How did you put out the light in Sean's window so the banshee could not see it? There was but one light to be seen from the bog."

"We didn't put it out," Boree replied. "We just gathered the little people in front of the window and blocked off the light, while Willie tolled the old witch to the far end of the bog and up the wet swale to the bog above Killaty. She won't find her way back here till Sean is well, I'll see to that."

THE light was shining from Sean's bedroom window and all the little people had disappeared, when we reached Annie McManus' home. I went to the door and called Doctor O'Connor. He gave me but one glance.

"Sean is now sleeping, and I believe he will get well," the doctor said. "I'll not ask you how you done it, Patrick, but we are thankful that you have returned safely. Get you home now, bathe and take some rest. We can talk later."

Like many another he left a diary, but this one was a thing of horror.

Beyond THE DOOR

BY PAUL SUTER

Heading by Joseph Eberle

"YOU haven't told me yet how it happened," I said to Mrs. Malkin.

She set her lips and eyed me, sharply.

"Didn't you talk with the coroner, sir?"

"Yes, of course," I admitted; "but as I understand you found my uncle, I thought—"

"Well, I wouldn't care to say anything about it," she interrupted, with decision.

This housekeeper of my uncle's was somewhat taller than I, and much heavier—two physical preponderances which afford any woman possessing them an advantage over the inferior male. She appeared a subject for diplomacy rather than argument.

Noting her ample jaw, her breadth of cheek, the unsentimental glint of her eye, I decided on conciliation. I placed a chair for her, there in my Uncle

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Godfrey's study, and dropped into another, myself.

"At least, before we go over the other parts of the house, suppose we rest a little," I suggested, in my most unctuous manner. "The place rather gets on one's nerves—don't you think so?"

It was sheer luck—I claim no credit for it. My chance reflection found the weak spot in her fortifications. She replied to it with an undoubted smack of satisfaction:

"It's more than seven years that I've been doing for Mr. Sarston, sir. Bringing him his meals regular as clockwork, keeping the house clean—as clean as he'd let me—and sleeping at my own home, o' nights; and in all that time I've said, over and over, there ain't a house in New York the equal of this for queerness."

"Nor anywhere else," I encouraged her, with a laugh; and her confidences opened another notch:

"You're likely right in that, too, sir. As I've said to poor Mr. Sarston, many a time, 'It's all well enough,' says I, 'to have bugs for a hobby. You can afford it; and being a bachelor and by yourself, you don't have to consider other people's likes and dislikes. And it's all well enough if you want to, says I, to keep thousands and thousands o' them in cabinets, all over the place, the way you do. But when it comes to pinnin' them on the walls in regular armies,' I says, 'and on the ceiling of your own study; and even on different parts of the furniture, so that a body don't know what awful things she's agoin' to find under her hand of a sudden when she does the dusting; why then,' I says to him, 'it's drivin' a decent woman too far.' "

"And did he never try to reform his ways when you told him that?" I asked, smiling.

"To be frank with you, Mr. Robinson when I talked like that to him, he generally raised my pay. And what was a body to do then?"

"I can't see how Lucy Lawton stood the place as long as she did," I observed, watching Mrs. Malkin's red face very closely.

She swallowed the bait, and leaned forward, hands on knees.

"Poor girl, it got on her nerves. But she was the quiet kind. You never saw her, sir?"

I shook my head.

"One of them slim, faded girls, with light hair, and hardly a word to say for herself. I don't believe she got to know the next-door neighbor in the whole year she lived with your uncle. She was an orphan, wasn't she, sir?"

"Yes," I said. "Godfrey Sarston and I were her only living relatives. That was why she came

from Australia to stay with him, after her father's death."

Mrs. Malkin nodded. I was hoping that, putting a check on my eagerness, I could lead her on to a number of things I greatly desired to know. Up to the time I had induced the housekeeper to show me through this strange house of my Uncle Godfrey's, the whole affair had been a mystery of lips which closed and faces which were averted at my approach. Even the coroner seemed unwilling to tell me just how my uncle had died.

"DID you understand she was going to live with him, sir?" asked Mrs. Malkin, looking hard at me.

I confirmed myself to a nod.

"Well, so did I. Yet, after a year, back she went."

"She went suddenly?" I suggested.

"So suddenly that I never knew a thing about it till after she was gone. I came to do my chores one day, and she was here. I came the next, and she had started back to Australia. That's how sudden she went."

"They must have had a falling out," I conjectured. "I suppose it was because of the house."

"Maybe it was and maybe it wasn't."

"You know of other reasons?"

"I have eyes in my head," she said. "But I'm not going to talk about it. Shall we be getting on now, sir?"

I tried another lead:

"I hadn't seen my uncle in five years, you know. He seemed terribly changed. He was not an old man, by any means, yet when I saw him at the funeral—" I paused, expectantly.

To my relief, she responded readily:

"He looked that way for the last few months, especially that last week, I spoke to him about it, two days before—before it happened, sir—and told him he'd do well to see the doctor again. But he cut me off short. My sister took sick the same day, and I was called out of town. The next time I saw him, he was—"

She paused, and then went on, sobbing:

"To think of him lyin' there in that awful place, and callin' and callin' for me, as I know he must, and me not around to hear him!"

As she stopped again, suddenly, and threw a suspicious glance at me, I hastened to insert a matter-of-fact question:

"Did he appear ill on that last day?"

"Not so much ill, as—"

"Yes?" I prompted.

She was silent a long time, while I waited, afraid that some word of mine had brought back her former attitude of hostility.

Then she seemed to make up her mind.

"I oughtn't to say another word. I've said too much, already. But you've been liberal with me, sir, and I know somethin' you've a right to be told, which I'm thinkin' no one else is agoin' to tell you. Look at the bottom of his study door a minute, sir."

I FOLLOWED her direction. What I saw led me to drop to my hands and knees the better to examine it.

"Why should he put a rubber strip on the bottom of his door?" I asked, getting up.

She replied with another enigmatical suggestion:

"Look at these, if you will, sir. "You'll remember that he slept in this study. That was his bed, over there in the alcove."

"Bolts!" I exclaimed. And I reinforced sight with touch by shooting one of them back and forth a few times. "Double bolts on the inside of this bedroom door! An upstairs room, at that. What was the idea?"

Mrs. Malkin portentously shook her head and sighed, as one unburdening her mind.

"Only this can I say, sir; he was afraid of something—terribly afraid, sir. Something that came in the night."

"What was it?" I demanded.

"I don't know, sir."

"It was in the night that—it happened?" I asked.

She nodded; then, as if the prologue were over, as if she had prepared my mind sufficiently, she produced something from under her apron. She must have been holding it there all the time.

"It's his diary, sir. It was lying here on the floor. I saved it for you, before the police could get their hands on it."

I opened the little book. One of the sheets near the back was crumpled, and I glanced at it, idly.

What I read there impelled me to slap the cover shut again.

"Did you read this?" I demanded.

She met my gaze, frankly.

"I looked into it, sir, just as you did—only just looked into it. Not for worlds would I do even that again!"

"I noticed some reference here to a slab in the cellar. What slab is that?"

"It covers an old, dried-up well, sir."

"Will you show it to me?"

"You can find it for yourself, sir, if you wish. I'm not goin' down there," she said, decidedly.

"Ah, well, I've seen enough for today," I told her. "I'll take the diary back to my hotel and read it."

I did not return to my hotel, however. In my one brief

glance into the little book, I had seen something which had bitten into my soul, only a few words, but they had brought me very near to that queer, solitary man who had been my uncle.

I dismissed Mrs. Malkin, and remained in the study. There was the fitting place to read the diary he had left behind him.

His personality lingered like a vapor in that study. I *settled* into his deep morris chair, and turned it to catch the light from the single, narrow window—the light, doubtless, by which he had written much of his work on entomology.

That same struggling illumination played shadowy tricks with hosts of wall-crucified insects, which seemed engaged in a united effort to crawl upward in sinuous lines. Some of their number, impaled to the ceiling itself, peered quiveringly down on the aspiring multitude. The whole house, with its crisp dead, rustling in any vagrant breeze, brought back to my mind the hand that had pinned them, one by one, on wall and ceiling and furniture. A kindly hand, I reflected, though eccentric; one not to be turned aside from its single hobby.

When quiet, peering Uncle Godfrey went, there passed out another of those scientific enthusiasts, whose passion for exact truth in some one direction has extended the bounds of human knowledge. Could not his unquestioned merits have been balanced against his sin? Was it necessary to even-handed justice that he die face-to-face with Horror, struggling with the thing he most feared? I ponder the question still, though his body—strangely bruised—has been long at rest.

THE entries in the little book began with the fifteenth of June. Everything before that date had been torn out. There, in the room where it had been written, I read my Uncle Godfrey's diary.

"It is done. I am trembling so that the words will hardly form under my pen, but my mind is collected. My course was for the best. Suppose I had married her? She would have been unwilling to live in this house. At the outset, her wishes would have come between me and my work, and that would have been only the beginning.

"As a married man, I could not have concentrated properly, I could not have surrounded myself with the atmosphere indispensable to the writing of my book. My scientific message would never have been delivered. As it is, though my heart is sore, I shall stifle these memories in work.

"I wish I had been more

gentle with her, especially when she sank to her knees before me, tonight. She kissed my hand. I should not have repulsed her so roughly. In particular, my words could have been better chosen. I said to her, bitterly: 'Get up, and don't nuzzle my hand like a dog.' She rose, without a word, and left me. How was I to know that, within an hour—

"I am largely to blame. Yet, had I taken any other course afterward than the one I did, the authorities would have misunderstood."

Again, there followed a space from which the sheets had been torn; but from the sixteenth of July, all the pages were intact. Something had come over the writing, too. It was still precise and clear—my Uncle Godfrey's characteristic hand—but the letters were less firm. As the entries approached the end, this difference became still more marked.

Here follows, then, the whole of his story; or as much of it as will ever be known. I shall let his words speak for him, without further interruption:

"My nerves are becoming more seriously affected. If certain annoyances do not shortly cease, I shall be obliged to procure medical advice. To be more specific, I find myself, at times, obsessed by an almost uncontrollable desire to descend to the cellar and lift the slab over the old well.

"I never have yielded to the impulse, but it had persisted for minutes together with such intensity that I have had to put work aside, and literally hold myself down in my chair. This insane desire comes only in the dead of night, when its disquieting effect is heightened by the various noises peculiar to the house.

"For instance, there often is a draft of air along the hallways, which causes a rustling among the specimens impaled on the walls. Lately, too, there have been other nocturnal sounds, strongly suggestive of the busy clamor of rats and mice. This calls for investigation. I have been at considerable expense to make the house proof against rodents, which might destroy some of my best specimens. If some structural defect has opened a way for them, the situation must be corrected at once."

"July 17th. The foundations and cellar were examined today by a workman. He states positively that there is no place of ingress for rodents. He contented himself with looking at the slab over the old well, without lifting it."

"July 19th. While I was sitting in this chair, late last night, writing, the impulse to descend to the cellar suddenly came upon

me with tremendous insistence. I yielded—which, perhaps, was as well. For at least I satisfied myself that the disquiet which possesses me has no external cause.

"The long journey through the hallways was difficult. Several times, I was keenly aware of the same sounds (perhaps I should say, the same IMPRESSIONS of sounds) that I had erroneously laid to rats. I am convinced now that they are more symptoms of my nervous condition. Further indications of this came in the fact that, as I opened the cellar door, the small noises abruptly ceased. There was no final scamper of tiny footfalls to suggest rats disturbed at their occupations.

"Indeed, I was conscious of a certain impression of expectant silence—as if the thing behind the noises, whatever it was, had paused to watch me enter its domain. Throughout my time in the cellar, I seemed surrounded by this same atmosphere. Sheer 'nerves,' of course.

"IN THE main, I held myself well under control. As I was about to leave the cellar, however, I unguardedly glanced back over my shoulder at the stone slab covering the old well. At that, a violent tremor came over me, and, losing all command, I rushed back up the cellar stairs, thence to this study. My nerves are playing me sorry tricks."

"July 30th. For more than a week, all has been well. The tone of my nerves seems distinctly better. Mrs. Malkin, who has remarked several times lately upon my paleness, expressed the conviction this afternoon that I am nearly my old self again. This is encouraging. I was beginning to fear that the severe strain of the past few months had left an indelible mark upon me.

"With continued health, I shall be able to finish my book by spring."

"July 31st. Mrs. Malkin remained rather late tonight in connection with some item of housework, and it was quite dark when I returned to my study from bolting the street door after her. The blackness of the upper hall, which the former owner of the house inexplicably failed to wire for electricity, was profound. As I came to the top of the second flight of stairs, something clutched at my foot, and, for an instant, almost pulled me back. I freed myself and ran to the study."

"August 3rd. Again the awful insistence. I sit here, with this diary upon my knee, and it seems that fingers of iron are tearing at me. I WILL NOT go! My nerves may be utterly un-

strung again (I fear they are), but I am still their master."

"August 4th. I did not yield, last night. After a bitter struggle, which must have lasted nearly an hour, the desire to go to the cellar suddenly departed. I must not give in at any time."

"August 5th. Tonight, the rat noises (I shall call them that for want of a more appropriate term) are very noticeable. I went to the length of unbolting my door and stepping into the hallway to listen. After a few minutes, I seemed to be aware of something large and gray watching me from the darkness at the end of the passage. This is a bizarre statement, of course, but it exactly describes my impression. I withdrew hastily into the study, and bolted the door.

"Now that my nerves' condition is so palpably affecting the optic nerve, I must not much longer delay seeing a specialist. But—how much shall I tell him?"

"August 8th. Several times, tonight, while sitting here at my work, I have seemed to hear soft footsteps, in the passage. 'Nerves' again, of course, or else some new trick of the wind among the specimens on the walls."

"August 9th. By my watch it is four o'clock in the morning. My mind is made up to record the experience I have passed through. Calmness may come that way.

"FEELING rather fatigued last night, from the strain of a weary day of research, I retired early. My sleep was more refreshing than usual, as it is likely to be when one is genuinely tired. I awakened, however (it must have been about an hour ago), with a start of tremendous violence.

"There was moonlight in the room. My nerves were on edge, but for a moment, I saw nothing unusual. Then, glancing toward the door, I perceived what appeared to be thin, white fingers, thrust under it—exactly as if some one outside the door were trying to attract my attention in that manner. I rose and turned on the light, but the fingers were gone.

"Needless to say, I did not open the door. I write the occurrence down, just as it took place, or as it seemed; but I can not trust myself to comment upon it."

"August 10th. Have fastened heavy rubber strips on the bottom of my bedroom door."

"August 15th. All quiet, for several nights. I am hoping that the rubber strips, being something definite and tangible, have had a salutary effect upon my nerves. Perhaps I shall not need to see a doctor."

"August 17th. Once more, I have been aroused from sleep. The interruptions seem to come always at the same hour—about three o'clock in the morning. I had been dreaming of the well in the cellar—the same dream, over and over—everything black except the slab, and a figure with bowed head and averted face sitting there. Also, I had vague dreams about a dog. Can it be that my last words to her have impressed that on my mind? I must pull myself together. In particular, I must not, under any pressure, yield, and visit the cellar after nightfall."

"August 18th. Am feeling much more hopeful. Mrs. Malkin remarked on it, while serving dinner. This improvement is due largely to a consultation I have had with Dr. Sartwell, the distinguished specialist in nervous diseases. I went into full details with him, excepting certain reservations. He scouted the idea that my experiences could be other than purely mental.

"When he recommended a change of scene (which I had been expecting), I told him positively that it was out of the question. He said then that, with the aid of a tonic and an occasional sleeping draft, I am likely to progress well enough at home. This is distinctly encouraging. I erred in not going to him at the start. Without doubt, most, if not all, of my hallucinations could have been averted.

"I have been suffering a needless penalty from my nerves for an action I took solely in the interests of science. I have no disposition to tolerate it further. From today, I shall report regularly to Dr. Sartwell."

"August 19th. Used the sleeping draft last night, with gratifying results. The doctor says I must repeat the dose for several nights, until my nerves are well under control again."

"August 21st. All well. It seems that I have found the way out—a very simple and prosaic way. I might have avoided much needless annoyance by seeking expert advice at the beginning. Before retiring, last night, I unbolted my study door and took a turn up and down the passage. I felt no trepidation. The place was as it used to be, before these fancies assailed me. A visit to the cellar after nightfall will be the test for my complete recovery, but I am not yet quite ready for that. Patience!"

"AUGUST 22nd. I have just read yesterday's entry, thinking to steady myself. It is cheerful—almost gay; and there are other entries like it in preceding pages. I am a mouse, in the grip of a cat. Let me have freedom for ever so short a time,

and I begin to rejoice at my escape. Then the paw descends again.

"It is four in the morning—the usual hour. I retired rather late, last night, after administering the draft. Instead of the dreamless sleep, which heretofore has followed the use of the drug, the slumber into which I fell was punctuated by recurrent visions of the slab, with the bowed figure upon it. Also, I had one poignant dream in which the dog was involved.

"AT LENGTH, I awakened, and reached mechanically for the light switch beside my bed. When my hand encountered nothing, I suddenly realized the truth. I was standing in my study, with my other hand upon the doorknob. It required only a moment, of course, to find the light and switch it on. I saw then that the bolt had been drawn back.

"The door was quite unlocked. My awakening must have interrupted me in the very act of opening it. I could hear something moving restlessly in the passage outside the door."

"August 23rd. I must beware of sleeping at night. Without confiding the fact to Dr. Sartwell, I have begun to take the drug in the daytime. At first, Mrs. Malkin's views on the subject were pronounced, but my explanations of 'doctor's orders' has silenced her. I am awake for breakfast and supper, and sleep in the hours between. She is leaving me, each evening, a cold lunch to be eaten at midnight."

"August 26th. Several times, I have caught myself nodding in my chair. The last time, I am sure that, on arousing, I perceived the rubber strip under the door bent inward, as if something were pushing it from the other side. I must not, under any circumstances, permit myself to fall asleep."

"September 2nd. Mrs. Malkin is to be away, because of her sister's illness. I can not help dreading her absence. Though she is here only in the daytime, even that companionship is very welcome."

"September 3rd. Let me put this into writing. The mere labor of composition has a soothing influence upon me. God knows, I need such an influence now, as never before!

"In spite of all my watchfulness, I fell asleep, tonight—across my bed. I must have been utterly exhausted. The dream I had was the one about the dog. I was patting the creature's head, over and over.

"I awoke, at last, to find myself in darkness, and in a standing position. There was a suggestion of chill and earthiness in the air. While I was drowsily

trying to get my bearings, I became aware that something was muzzling my hand, as a dog might do.

"Still saturated with my dream, I was not greatly astonished. I extended my hand, to pat the dog's head. That brought me to my senses. I was standing in the cellar.

"THE THING BEFORE ME WAS NOT A DOG!

"I can not tell how I fled back up the cellar stairs. I know, however, that, as I turned, the slab was visible, in spite of the darkness, with something sitting upon it. All the way up the stairs, hands snatched at my feet. . . ."

THIS entry seemed to finish this diary, for blank pages followed it; but I remembered the crumpled sheet, near the back of the book. It was partly torn out, as if a hand had clutched it, convulsively. The writing on it, too, was markedly in contrast to the precise, albeit nervous penmanship of even the last entry I had perused. I was forced to hold the scrawl up to the light to decipher it. This is what I read:

"My hand keeps on writing, in spite of myself. What is this? I do not wish to write, but it compels me. Yes, yes, I will tell the truth, I will tell the truth."

A heavy blot followed, partly covering the writing. With difficulty, I made it out:

"The guilt is mine—mine, only. I loved her too well, yet I was unwilling to marry, though she entreated me on her knees—though she kissed my hand. I told her my scientific work came first. She did it, herself. I was not expecting that—I swear I was not expecting it. But I was afraid the authorities would misunderstand. So I took what seemed the best course. She had no friends here who would inquire.

"It is waiting outside my door. I FEEL it. It compels me, through my thoughts. My hand keeps on writing. I must not fall asleep. I must think only of what I am writing. I must—"

Then came the words I had seen when Mrs. Malkin had handed me the book. They were written very large. In places, the pen had dug through the paper. Though they were scrawled, I read them at a glance:

"Not the slab in the cellar! Not that! Oh, my God, anything but that! Anything—"

By what strange compulsion was the hand forced to write down what was in the brain; even to the ultimate thoughts; even to those final words?

THE gray light from outside, slanting down through two dull little windows, sank into the

sodden hole near the inner wall. The coroner and I stood in the cellar, but not too near the hole.

A small, demonstrative, dark man—the chief of detectives—stood a little apart from us, his eyes intent, his natural animation suppressed. We were watching the stooped shoulders of a police constable, who was angling in the well.

"See anything, Walters?" inquired the detective, raspingly.

The policeman shook his head.

The little man turned his questioning to me.

"You're quite sure?" he demanded.

"Ask the coroner. He saw the diary," I told him.

"I'm afraid there can be no doubt," the coroner confirmed, in his heavy, tired voice.

He was an old man, with lacklustre eyes. It had seemed best to me, on the whole, that he should read my uncle's diary. His position entitled him to all the available facts. What we were seeking in the well might especially concern him.

He looked at me opaquely now, while the policeman bent double again. Then he spoke—like one who reluctantly and at last does his duty. He nodded toward the slab of gray stone, which lay in the shadow to the left of the well.

"It doesn't seem very heavy, does it?" he suggested, in an undertone.

I shook my head. "Still, it's stone," I demurred. "A man would have to be rather strong to lift it."

"To lift it—yes." He glanced about the cellar. "Ah, I forgot," he said, abruptly. "It is in my office, as part of the evidence." He went on, half to himself: "A man—even though not very strong—could take a stick—for instance, the stick that is now in my office—and prop up the slab. If he wished to look into the well," he whispered.

The policeman interrupted, straightening again with a groan, and laying his electric torch beside the well.

"It's breaking my back," he complained. "There's dirt down there. It seems loose, but I can't get through it. Somebody'll have to go down."

The detective cut in:

"I'm lighter than you, Walters."

"I'm not afraid, sir."

"I didn't say you were," the little man snapped. "There's nothing down there, anyway—though we'll have to prove that, I suppose." He glanced truculently at me, but went on talking to the constable: "Rig the rope around me, and don't bungle the knot. I've no intention of falling into the place."

"There is something there,"

whispered the coroner, slowly, to me. His eyes left the little detective and the policeman, carefully tying and testing knots, and turned again to the square slab of stone.

"Suppose—while a man was looking into that hole—with the stone propped up—he should accidentally knock the prop away?" He was still whispering.

"A stone so light that he could prop it up wouldn't be heavy enough to kill him," I objected.

"No." He laid a hand on my shoulder. "Not to kill him—to paralyze him—if it struck the spine in a certain way. To render him helpless, but not unconscious. The post mortem would disclose that, through the bruises on the body."

THE policeman and the detective had adjusted the knots to their satisfaction. They were bickering now as to the details of the descent.

"Would that cause death?" I whispered.

"You must remember that the housekeeper was absent for two days. In two days, even that pressure—" He stared at me hard, to make sure that I understood—"with the head down—"

Again the policeman interrupted:

"I'll stand at the well, if you gentlemen will grab the rope behind me. It won't be much of a pull. I'll take the brunt of it."

We let the little man down, with the electric torch strapped to his waist, and some sort of implement—a trowel or a small spade—in his hand. It seemed a long time before his voice, curiously hollow, directed us to stop. The hole must have been deep.

We braced ourselves. I was second, the coroner, last. The policeman relieved his strain somewhat by snagging the rope against the edge of the well.

A noise like muffled scratching reached us from below. Occasionally, the rope shook and shifted slightly at the edge of the hole. At last, the detective's hollow voice spoke.

"What does he say?" the coroner demanded.

The policeman turned his square, dogged face toward us.

"I think he's found something," he explained.

THE rope jerked and shifted again. Some sort of struggle seemed to be going on below. The weight suddenly increased, and as suddenly lessened, as if something had been grasped, then had managed to elude the grasp and slip away. I could catch the detective's rapid breathing now; also the sound of inarticulate speech in his hollow voice.

The next words I caught came more clearly. They were a command to pull up. At the same moment, the weight on the rope grew heavier, and remained so.

The policeman's big shoulders began straining, rhythmically.

"All together," he directed. "Take it easy. Pull when I do."

Slowly, the rope passed through our hands. Then it tightened suddenly, and there was an ejaculation from below —just below. Still holding fast, the policeman contrived to stoop over and look. He translated the ejaculation for us.

"Let down a little. He's struck with it against the side."

We slackened the rope, until the detective's voice gave us the word again.

The rhythmic tugging continued. Something dark appeared, quite abruptly, at the top of the hole. My nerves leapt in spite of me, but it was merely the top of the detective's head—his dark hair. Something white came next—his pale face, with staring eyes. Then his shoulders, bowed forward, the better to support what was in his arms. Then—

I looked away; but, as he laid his burden down at the side of the well, the detective whispered to us:

"He had her covered up with dirt—covered up . . ."

He began to laugh—a little, high cackle, like a child's—until the coroner took him by the shoulders and deliberately shook him. Then the policeman led him out of the cellar.

IT WAS not then, but afterward, that I put my question to the coroner.

"Tell me," I demanded. "People pass there at all hours. Why didn't my uncle call for help?"

"I have thought of that," he replied. "I believe he did call. I think, probably, he screamed. But his head was down, and he couldn't raise it. His screams must have been swallowed up in the well."

"You are sure he didn't murder her?" He had given me that assurance before, but I wished it again.

"Almost sure," he declared. "Though it was on his account, undoubtedly, that she killed herself. Few of us are punished as accurately for our sins as he was."

One should be thankful, even for crumbs of comfort. I am thankful.

But there are times when my uncle's face rises before me. After all, we were the same blood, our sympathies had much in common; under any given circumstances, our thoughts and feelings must have been largely the same. I seem to see him in that final death march along the unlighted passageway—obeying

an imperative summons—going on, step by step—down the stairway to the first floor, down the cellar stairs—at last, lifting the slab.

I try not to think of the final expiation. Yet was it final? I wonder. Did the last Door of all, when it opened, find him willing to pass through? Or was something waiting beyond that Door?

THE EYRIE

(Continued from second cover)

Come on, fans. If we yell loud enough and long enough we may convince the publishers that they should expand this field of weird fiction.

Henry D. Barnett,
Crystal City, Mo.

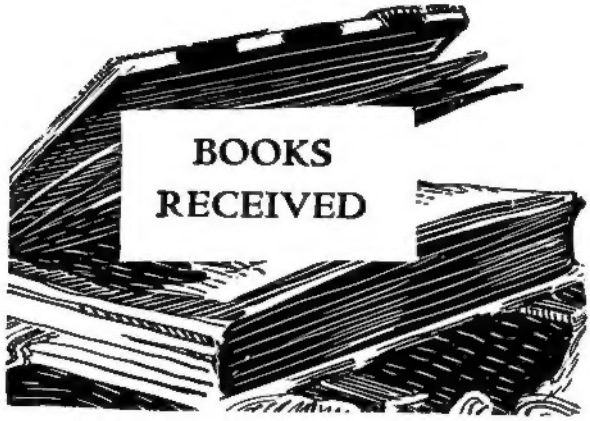
The Editor, WEIRD TALES
9 Rockefeller Plaza
New York 20, N. Y.

The new, pocket-sized WEIRD TALES is—so far as artistic and literary quality is concerned—as good as it has been in the past.

Apropos of Mr. M. McNeil's recent question in The Eyrie anent the difference between stf and weird literature, I am always ready to take up the cudgels in defense of the weird tale. Gothic literature is meant to entertain. I do not believe in the existence of vampires and werewolves but I enjoy reading about such betes noires. *A well-written tale of horror can make you forget your actual surroundings and transport you to a mediaeval castle haunted by things more palpable than mere memories. I know such a sentence smacks of the histrionic but I actually experience such emotions when I read a good Gothic romance. On the other hand, there is something about the very thought of death-rays, rocket ships, ancipitus Martians, and other familiars of scientifiction that prevents from relinquishing my skepticism even while I'm reading about them. There have been good stf yarns just as there have been bad Gothics, but, on the whole, stf—and, in particular, modern stf—is puerile.*

So far as I'm concerned, the best story in the March, 1954, WEIRD TALES is "The Grave at Goonhilly" by G. G. Pendarves. As I recall, a few months ago WT reprinted another of Mr. Pendarves' wonderful tales, called, I think, "Thing of Darkness." It is evident that Mr. Pendarves can write but I don't believe any of his Gothic romances ever appeared in book form. I've never even come across his name in any anthology of ghost stories. Until some publisher decides to put out a collection of G. G. Pendarves' best works, I think WT should continue to reprint Mr. Pendarves' writings. I hope they are all as good as those which have come back in print in recent issues. More power to you when you recognize the maturity of horrific and weird literature.

Irving Glassman,
Brooklyn, N. Y.



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* * * *

Also a very comprehensive index of the WEIRD & FANTASTICA in Magazines as compiled by Bradford M. Day. The compiler has studied many sources—to which he gives careful credit—and his lists comprise (in multigraphed form) stories in the genre from WEIRD TALES, Golden Fleece, Strange Stories, Oriental Stories, Magic Carpet, Tales of Magic and Mystery, Thrill Book, Strange Stories, Complete Stories, Romance Magazine, Popular Magazine, The Idler, Blue Book, etc. For students of the field, the index will provide a very complete compilation. It can be obtained by sending $2 to the publisher; Bradford M. Day, 127–01 116 Avenue, South Ozone Park 20, New York.

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